HOLDING THE WOUNDED HEART:

IMPLEMENTING TRAUMA-INFORMED MINISTRY FOR NARCISSISTIC ABUSE SURVIVORS IN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATIONS

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Narcissistic abuse is a widespread issue that faith communities are often unaware of. In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, trauma is often understood as related to catastrophic events rather than situations of cumulative, long-term psychological and emotional abuse. This study begins in a place of inquiry: What resources might already available within the congregational system for survivors to begin healing spiritually? What might clergy and other leadership have to put into place to create an effective trauma-informed ministry for these survivors? Utilizing an intercultural care model and a solid understanding of the science of trauma, a trauma-informed congregation can begin to offer survivors spiritual aid in dealing with the effects of trauma: specifically, helping to restore them to a sense of self within their minds, hearts, and bodies. Through carefully crafting worship opportunities with preaching, prayer, and rituals geared toward spiritual healing from emotional abuse, congregations can offer survivors opportunities

for healing. Likewise, trauma-informed pastoral opportunities (both individual sessions and small group formats) can be places for survivors to recover from feelings of isolation and disconnection. Teaching spiritual practices--such as mindfulness, mantras, lectio divina, expressive arts practices, body and movement practices, and gratitude & compassion practices--can further aid a survivor in being restored to their sense of self-ownership, releasing the shame they carry. The Appendices provide materials suitable for Unitarian Universalist communities, but any faith community can adapt these ideas to their own traditions and culture. Ultimately, churches are also called to be accountable for the health of their internal systems; in order to do the work of offering healing for survivors, faith communities themselves must be whole and healthy.

“Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not, 'How can we hide our wounds?' so we don't have to be embarrassed, but 'How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?' When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers.”

--Henri Nouwen

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Introduction

Context of Project and Its Writer

As an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister, my M.Div. training from Meadville Lombard Theological School was primarily focused on the practical arts of ministry with an emphasis in fostering emotionally and spiritually healthy congregants who, in turn, can effectively navigate healthy congregational systems. Subsequently, I received an M.A. from Claremont Lincoln University in Interfaith Action, with a particular emphasis in the healing work of conflict resolution, dialogue, and mindfulness practices as the means to develop more racially diverse and culturally expansive congregations. Currently, my work is located in the parish setting, in the midst of my sixth year as sole minister for a congregation of approximately 220 members and 100+ friends.

Informed by my identity as gay, I was inspired by the marriage equality movement to become a social activist. I have found a home in the Unitarian Universalist faith tradition which welcomes the eclecticism of my theology, formed in the Christian (Disciples of Christ) ethics of my childhood but now theologically more open and primarily manifesting as Religious Humanism with an appreciation of mystery and mysticism. As a white male, I recognize the importance of honestly reckoning with the inherent privilege of my own social/racial location which has led me to dedicate a significant portion in my ministry to anti-racism and anti-oppression work, which includes a recognition of the trauma that marginalized people are likely to encounter. My approach to ministry is inherently interfaith (within the limitations of my own perspective and knowledge) which is compatible with Unitarian Universalism's open theology. Ultimately, I see ministry as a way to foster both personal and societal healing and wholeness,

which is one of my driving forces for seeking to aid those who are suffering the spiritual wounding that results from abusive situations.

The Heart of this Project

Much of the impetus for this project comes from my observations and experiences within the Unitarian Universalist parish setting. At a former position of employment, I endured what I later understood to be indicative of the way narcissistic abuse manifests in the workplace setting. This devastating experience left me reeling as I tried to explain (to myself and others) what I had experienced. Little did I know at the time that my perplexed state was similar to that of so many others who have experienced this kind of abuse; they, too, had been left confused and uncertain, struggling to regain their self-esteem and make sense of a chain of circumstances characterized by emotional manipulation, gas-lighting, shaming, unwarranted criticism, and so on. Like so many other abuse trauma survivors, I, too, experienced a spiritual crisis, questioning that which had previously left me spiritually nourished, wondering where I could find emotional and spiritual safety, and feeling lost as to how to restore my sense of self.

As difficult as this experience was, it has allowed me in my current ministerial position to see similar signs when people come to my church's doors as survivors of some form of narcissistic abuse. Likewise, as public discourse from politicians and other community representatives has escalated in disturbing ways in recent years, a case can be made that we are currently a nation of survivors of narcissistic abuse.

Thus, the positioning of my ministry, my personal experiences, and my professional observations have led me to this project which I hold deep passion for. My hope is that the methodology explored herein can serve as a 'roadmap' for clergy in congregational settings to begin the important work of assessing their own and their congregation's strengths and

limitations as caregivers for narcissistic abuse survivors, and then do the work of augmenting their available resources to begin the work of serving (even in some small way) as trauma recovery centers. The work of truly healing the human heart can only be done by the survivor, but our churches can hold those wounded hearts, creating space and support for the sacred act of spiritual healing to begin.

Chapter 1: Understanding Narcissistic Abuse Survivors

The Problem of Narcissistic Abuse

Narcissistic abuse is a widespread problem affecting a surprisingly large number of people—many of whom either arrive at or are already positioned within faith communities and deeply traumatized by their experiences; they are wounded and in need of spiritual healing that intentionally encompasses and addresses the abuse they have suffered. Despite the scope of this form of abuse, many survivors have little awareness of how to name or articulate the details of their experience. Understandably then, many of their faith leaders are equally unaware of this form of abuse or what to do to help their congregants to begin the work of harnessing the resources and ministry of the church to aid in their spiritual recovery. Two questions emerge as we begin to consider this topic: what is narcissistic abuse exactly and how do we understand recovery for survivors of this form of abuse as the responsibility of the church?

In answer to that last question, one could posit that one of the greatest mysteries that religion has historically tried to illuminate has been that of understanding the human heart: Why did that particular person do what they did? What motivates some to do good and some to do evil? What do we do to recover from those who have hurt us? As Henri Nouwen says, "We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually."[1] Nouwen recognizes that the universality of the experience of being wounded positions us to effectively care for one another, even as the specifics of the wounding experience vary from person to person.

Mercifully, modernity has given us scientific disciplines such as psychology and sociology to aid in explaining some of humanity's woundedness, and we recognize that there are

[1] Henri Nouwen, "The Wounded Healer," HenriNouwen, accessed Dec. 1, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20200807213215/https://henrinouwen.org/meditation/the-wounded-healer/.

patterns of behavior that fall into particular personality disorders. As Judith Herman says in her classic work on trauma, *Trauma and Recovery: The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror*, "To study psychological trauma is to come face to face both with human vulnerability in the natural world and with the capacity for evil in human nature."[2] Thus, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, NPD, in revealing both human vulnerability and humanity's capacity to do harm, becomes a concern for faith communities for it is another way that we can understand the experience of the wounded human heart. While narcissism (beyond the superficial understanding of it as someone in love with themselves) is slightly better understood by the general public these days, there is still a long way to go in cultivating the depth of comprehension needed to help those who are struggling.

Depending upon the resource cited, current literature on narcissistic abuse suggests that between 60 million and 158 million individuals in the United States are affected by it at some point in their lives.[3] This is a staggering number of people, most of whom have not formally identified the abuse as narcissistic as they lack knowledge on the subject; they might have suffered a confusing and complicated mix of cumulative psychological, verbal, and emotional abuse at the hands of a narcissistic parent, sibling, friend, boss, or other authority figure (even clergy). Likewise, the style of leadership at top administrative levels in the United States has been identified as narcissistic by many experts, meaning one could regard the United States as an entire nation of people who are potential survivors of narcissistic abuse.[4] Since the 1980s, testing for narcissistic traits in college students has seen a "growing rise of cultural entitlement,

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[2] Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*: *The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 23.

[3] Sandra L. Brown, "60 Million People in the U.S. Negatively Affected by Someone Else's Pathology," Psychology Today, August 28, 2010, https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/pathological-relationships/201008/60-million-people-in-the-us-negatively-affected-someone-elses.

[4] Bandy Lee, *The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump: 37 Psychiatrists and Mental Health Experts Assess a President* **(**New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2019), xx-xxv.

materialism, vanity, and antisocial behaviors."[5] Unfortunately, with narcissistic behavior increasing, more victims will be left in its wake. Seen in this light, recovery from narcissistic abuse is one of the most concerning and pressing issues of our time—and yet, it remains often invisible to faith communities.

In response to this urgency, by creating a project designed to address spiritual healing, we can begin to take this issue beyond the walls of the psychologist's or therapist's office and into the faith communities where so many who are wounded--either by personal experiences or even by the narcissistic atmosphere of the general culture--are to be found. For the purposes of this project, those who have experienced narcissistic abuse at any level will be referred to as "survivors," and while we will primarily explore responses to survivors of individual abuse scenarios, much of what is presented here also has a macro-application: in one sense or another, few of us remain completely untouched by the abusive manipulations of the narcissist, if not in our own lives, then in the larger culture we are part of. If one of the jobs of religious community is to bring wholeness and healing to individuals, then this is an area of concern that should not be ignored given how it has permeated so many lives. Moreover, if another job of religious community is to build a better, more compassionate world, then within religious community we must address the spiritual damage done by the machinations of narcissistic leadership or we will continue to perpetuate cycles of abuse on both individual and societal scales.

But what exactly is narcissism as it manifests in negative ways, especially with regard to those who are actually diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder? In brief, those suffering from NPD have an exaggerated sense of self-importance and a sense of entitlement.

[5] Kenneth N. Levy, William D. Ellison, and Joseph S. Reynoso, "A Historical Review of Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality," in *The Handbook of Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorders: Theoretical approaches, empirical findings and treatments*, eds. W. K. Campbell and J. Miller (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2011), 55.

They exhibit "pathological self-love expressed in grandiosity, superiority, omnipotence, emotional shallowness, and a discrepancy between exaggerated talents and ambitions and actual capacity and achievements; pathological object-love characterized by envy and devaluation of others, exploitative behavior, lack of empathy and inability to depend on others."[6] A narcissist might monopolize conversations and belittle or look down on people they perceive as inferior, and they expect special favors and unquestioning compliance with their expectations. They take advantage of others—even (or especially) those in their most intimate circle--to get what they want, and have an inability or unwillingness to recognize the needs and feelings of others. Even as they envy others, they boast about themselves. On the more severe end of the spectrum are "those with 'malignant narcissism,' with extreme ego-syntonic sadism and cruelty, self-righteous aggression, violence, or self-destructiveness."[7]

Most candidates for an NPD diagnosis never receive one because that would require them to seek help, which is antithetical to the demands of the disorder. Whether there is a formal diagnosis or not, being in relationship with someone who has strong narcissistic traits, whether in one's house, at one's workplace, or as a leader in one's country, is a deeply wounding dynamic. These relationships often devolve into abusive patterns characterized by periods where the narcissist woos the survivor back into their domain only to begin the cycle of abuse all over again. A survivor of narcissistic abuse will often feel that their options and even their world have grown small and narrow after experiencing this long cycle of abuse. A survivor will take and hold undeserved blame and guilt that the abuser refuses to be accountable for, personally laying claim within themselves to the negative traits the narcissist has projected on to them. This

[6] Elsa Ronningstam, "Psychoanalytic Theories on Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality," in *The Handbook of Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorders: Theoretical approaches, empirical findings and treatments*, eds. W. K. Campbell and J. Miller (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2011), 141.

[7] Ronningstam, "Psychoanalytic Theories," 141.

constant cycle of gas-lighting, manipulation, rejection, and denial of their own needs can eventually lead the survivor (even after disconnecting from the abuser) into a spiral of self-destruction marked by a sense of spiritual imbalance. A survivor might feel that the divine no longer has benevolent intentions or feelings for them; they may feel spiritually broken; they may question their meaning and purpose in the world. These responses are, indeed, trauma responses, which is no surprise since "traumatic events call into question human relationships. They breach the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis."[8]

As a parish minister, I have witnessed a significant number of people who seek out a congregational home after experiencing trauma. Many come to the church after an event easily recognized by the average person as being traumatic: the death of a loved one, the loss of the relationship with a friend or family member, divorce, a change in physical or mental health, or the loss of a job. With little explanation needed, most congregants and clergy understand that these events are profoundly traumatic and these newcomers are treated accordingly, often easily integrating into existing pastoral care systems while they regularly hear sympathetic reflections about their experiences reflected in sermons and other communications from the church. Someone who has experienced narcissistic abuse, however, may intuitively find their way to the church's door, but their experience is not one that is easily or accurately explained as a one-time traumatic event. How does one put into words decades of subtle emotional manipulation by a spouse, especially if that person never utilized overtly abusive language or became physically

[8] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 112.

abusive? How does one explain years of working for a boss who expertly took credit for the survivor's work, all the while undercutting their self-esteem? How can the complicated relationship with a narcissistic parent be explained: the life-long cycle of trying desperately to gain acceptance only to fall into despair when nothing is ever quite good enough to receive that parent's long-term approval? Few people who have not received intensive therapy have the language to identify this as narcissistic abuse; and even if they do possess the proper terminology, it is likely that the clergy and other congregants they encounter will not have the specificity of education needed on this topic to fully understand the depth of their experience.

Thus, it is not uncommon for survivors to find their full selves and experiences unwitnessed in the very place they have sought out for meaningful community connection and spiritual healing. In turn, spiritually wounded people, especially those who are not receiving the acknowledgement and help they need, may very well act out within the church system, if only to feel in control in some small way. One of the greatest central challenges of the trauma experience is the feeling that one is no longer in charge of oneself. Bessel van der Kolk says it this way: "Trauma robs you of the feeling that you are in charge of yourself, of what I will call self-leadership. . . . The challenge of recovery is to reestablish ownership of your body and your mind—of your self."[9] Certainly, this is understandable, since "even after recovery, fear can set off a neurological alarm system that drops survivors back into their lived theology of fear where threat feels imminent and real."[10] In other words, trauma survivors can experience triggering that sets them back into a fear-based place that leaves them feeling helpless and lacking control of their own experience.

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[9] Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score (*New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2014), 205.

[10] Carrie Doehring, *The Practice of Pastoral Care* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 136.

If moral trauma has occurred, then a person's entire belief system can be destroyed, leaving them feeling powerless, rudderless, and deeply conflicted. In *Soul Repair*, Camillo "Mac" Bica is quoted as saying that trauma "erodes moral being, undoes character, and reduces decent men and women to savages capable of incredible cruelty that would have never been possible before their having been victimized by and sacrificed to war."[11] Certainly, it's not only veterans of war that can feel like they no longer resemble the person they knew themselves to be; after the trauma of narcissistic abuse (which can easily tread into the ground of moral trauma when acting under the influence of the questionable ethics of a narcissistic personality), a survivor can feel that they are no longer quite themselves anymore. Their lives are not quite their own; their choices, feelings, and responses can feel like they are no longer theirs to make; they feel fragmented. They might be outwardly very capable people who attain roles as church leaders, only to have episodes where their woundedness is on display in challenging behaviors, whether it is being conflict avoidant, reactive, or emotionally devastated when the church, over time, has failed to provide them with what they need.

Research Questions

So how can the Unitarian Universalist congregational setting provide these narcissistic abuse survivors with what they need to begin healing spiritually? What resources might already available within the congregational system? What resources are already there that require modification and augmentation in order to create space for effective healing from abuse? What might clergy and other leadership have to put into place to create an effective trauma-informed ministry for these survivors? And what spiritual practices, knowledge, and perspectives can aid in addressing the effects of this form of abuse?

[11] Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini, *Soul Repair (*Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), 110.

Chapter Two: Foundations for the Project

Having now explored the widespread issue of narcissistic abuse and the open question of what faith communities can do to aid survivors in spiritual healing, we now consider how to ground our response to survivors' needs in practices that are inclusive, affirming, and aware of the latest scientific understanding of trauma and spiritual healing.

The Theology of an Intercultural Care Model

In *The Practice of Pastoral Care,* Carrie Doehring explicates an intercultural care model that is complementary to the inclusive values of Unitarian Universalism and therefore serves as a good foundation upon which to build a specifically UU trauma response model for narcissistic abuse survivors. Doehring writes, "the intertwined goals of liberation and integration are closely tied with. . .intercultural care: namely, its focus on compassionately entering into the stories of care seekers and listening for how these stories are shaped by family and cultural narratives that afford or deny privileges."[12] Aligning with Doehring's concern, contemporary Unitarian Universalism is also expressly interested in examining the power and privilege that shape our lives, as well as dismantling systems of white supremacy.

On practicing intercultural ability in UU settings, Renee Ruchotzke writes, "Its leaders must learn to model how to de-center the culture of the congregation from White identity and culture."[13] Doehring's intercultural care model has similar intentions; indeed, the care giver is charged with de-centering their own culture and instead welcoming in the experiences and identities of the survivor "trusting in the ultimate goodness of alterity."[14] Furthermore, the

[12] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, xx.
[13] Renee Ruchotzke, "Practicing Intercultural Ability," Unitarian Universalist Association, November 15, 2017, https://web.archive.org/web/20220401025300/https://www.uua.org/leaderlab/practicing-intercultural-agility.
[14] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, 3.

intercultural care model is one that makes room for exploration and acknowledgement of the intersectionality that informs peoples' lives which is also one of the current aims of contemporary Unitarian Universalism. While Doehring does not use the term "intersectionality" extensively, I nonetheless see one of the greatest benefits of this intercultural care model as making room for people to fully own the intersectionality of their lives and identities, all of which can play into better understanding the ways in which their own vulnerabilities, social location, or marginalization might have been exploited by the narcissist for the purposes of abuse. The intention here is to infuse any church-based trauma response plan with encouragement for the survivor to explore their full selves—including race, gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, and so on. Every idea and example contained with this project is presented with the caveat that they must be adapted to the lived realities of the people the caregivers are attempting to serve. In making this space for people to bring their full selves to the table for healing, this inclusive act gestures toward what one could argue is Unitarian Universalism's understanding of salvation: wholeness.

Ultimately, in today's Unitarian Universalism, the emphasis is less on the perfection of the individual and more on achieving this sense of wholeness as a human being. Wholeness in this case can be defined as finding a balance both within and outside of oneself, or, to use Doehring's language, wholeness can be seen as a form of spiritual transformation, the "likely outcome of spiritually integrative keystone habits that align values, beliefs, and spiritual practices."[15] From a religious standpoint, this is partially achieved by integrating the multiple liberal theological strands that are currently most prevalent in Unitarian Universalism. One might describe them as: Jewish and Christian ethics (love thy neighbor; justice), the Humanist

[15] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, 142.

sense of personal empowerment, the Religious Naturalist and Pagan emphasis on connection to the natural world, and a sense of body/mind peace or even transcendence informed by Buddhism and other traditions. The resources created for this project have been informed by these various and intertwining theological strands. Unitarian Universalism's primary theologies today invite wholeness in individuals by asking them to consider their relationship to and find a balance between community, their inner self, and the natural world, all within the framework of their relationship to something greater than themselves, whether they understand that as God, interdependence, love, or something else.

Thus, if spiritual wholeness is the goal of Unitarian Universalism, then Doehring's intercultural care model with its emphasis on spiritual integration seems ideally suited for helping achieve that aim, particularly in the case of survivors who feel fragmented and disconnected from their core self. Again and again, Doehring's philosophy of care can be understood as a movement toward wholeness, particularly in the way it values the full self and experience of the individual. For instance, in the case of lived theologies (defined by Doehring as being "comprised of core values, foundational beliefs, and ways of coping and connecting with the sacred"[16]), the beauty of Doehring's approach is that the caregiver creates space for the care seeker to fully explore these embedded theologies. Often these lived theologies inspire in abuse survivors problematic coping behaviors or can be based in unhelpful theology ("God hates me," "I'm unworthy of love," etc.). Besides engaging in compassionate listening, Doehring encourages caregivers to actively listen for these themes within the narratives people share about their lives, and, in these times of reflection, "caregivers and care seekers can explore moments of comfort, peace, hope, courage, and love to see how such emotions reveal a

[16] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, 118.

more life-giving theology."[17] Through this process, the collaborative work of caregiver and seeker can result in more life-giving theologies, rather than the lived theologies embedded in old trauma narratives. Certainly, this process is very complementary to the aims and ideals of contemporary Unitarian Universalism: like UUism, exploring lived theologies acknowledges the complicated and multi-layered beliefs that arise out of peoples' experiences of abuse. It does not ignore the oppressions and traumas that inform their lives. Similarly, the co-creation of more life-giving theologies speaks to the power of Unitarian Universalism's central tenet that we are made more whole by coming together in community rather than being alone.

Connecting with the sacred, or, for those who are theistic, exploring one's relationship with God, also benefits from the Doehring model complemented by Unitarian Universalism. While UUism today does not conceive of one particular God for all, all of the historical and contemporary UU theological conceptions of God have been based on a loving God. Universalism historically conceived of a God that was ultimately and always reconciled with humanity, and this idea continues to echo in Unitarian Universalism today. Yet, however our members understand God or the sacred, we always come back to the notion that there is no value in believing in a divine force that does not unconditionally love them. This is exemplified in the caregiving process when Doehring says that "the compassion of caregivers reveals the goodness of creation, humanity, and God."[18] This optimism (rooted in the realities of caring relationships) has always been central to Unitarian Universalism in all its incarnations. Doehring puts forth the idea that when we take in the goodness that surrounds and connects us all, we are changed for the better;[19] this too has been central to Unitarian Universalism. In fact,

[17] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, 124.
[18] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, 86.
[19] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, 85.

Doehring's ongoing plan of care consists of "fostering compassion and trust," "mourning losses and holding people accountable," and "reconnecting with the goodness of life."[20] This plan of care very much resembles the basic Religious Humanistic principles that drive much of contemporary Unitarian Universalism worship and community in practice.

Literature: Pastoral and Scientific

Besides Carrie Doehring's *The Practice of Pastoral Care* and its emphasis on intercultural care, other key pieces of literature also provide helpful ways of creating a UU abuse-based trauma response grounded in both science and keen social awareness, though there is scant available literature that addresses the process of specifically attending to the spiritual needs of narcissistic abuse survivors. In Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score*, (one of the leading contemporary books on the topic of trauma), the author acknowledges that trauma can stem from a single incident or a series of on-going experiences, all of which can essentially re-wire the way the brain responds in any given circumstance. As van der Kolk puts it, neuroplasticity points to the idea that "when a circuit fires repeatedly, it can become a default setting—the response most likely to occur."[21] For people experiencing narcissistic abuse--which is often found in relationships that span multiple years, if not decades--the repetition of traumatic incidents of abuse undoubtedly re-wires the brain. Because UUs have so often ignored trauma outside of catastrophic events, van der Kolk's scientific approach provides an invaluable way to better understand the need for healing that is much more common in our community than we have been prepared to admit. Moreover, it helps us better understand many people (not just hurricane or school shooting survivors) who might find their way to our

[20] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, 174.
[21] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 107.

communities; these not uncommon traumatized individuals might have become hypervigilant to perceived threats, triggering primitive survival responses, like fight or flight.[22]

The human brain can struggle to properly process traumatic events, leaving us forever in a limbo-like existence where our traumas remain intertwined with our lived present. In cases of PTSD, "the trauma may be over, but it keeps being replayed in continually recycling memories and in a reorganized nervous system."[23] As in the work of both Doehring and van der Kolk, Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini's *Soul Repair* reinforces the importance of being present as deep listeners who are compassionate and honest witnesses to the trauma survivor's truth: "When a community takes responsibility for helping. . .it must do so with integrity, rather than by scapegoating individuals or pressuring them to deny what they know to be true."[24] Again, this speaks to the call of contemporary Unitarian Universalism to honestly acknowledge the realities of suffering in our midst by narcissistic abuse survivors. Understanding the neurological realities and physical responses to the on-going nature of trauma is crucial to meeting our congregants where they truly are; we cannot be fully compassionate witnesses to them if we do not understand the functioning of the brain after trauma or we deny their lived realities.

Of course, while the depth of the neuroscientific approach van der Kolk explores is not going to be directly useful to the average spiritual caregiver in a UU setting, it does invite us to be more fully aware of the scientific reality of trauma. This rational and intellectual approach is, of course, in keeping with the UU tradition, and while we look as a faith community to expand beyond the realm of reason, the appreciation of scientific realities nonetheless remains

[22] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 145.
[23] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 159.
[24] Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 104.

important to our community. In other words, if we are going to craft spiritual responses to trauma from narcissistic abuse, we are being true to our tradition by making sure those responses are backed by modern scientific understandings. We cannot simply tell people to "move on" or "get over" what a narcissistic parent, spouse, or boss did to them; we know now that it has caused real changes in the way their brains respond to input.[25]

In keeping with this approach, van der Kolk suggests that "talking, (re-) connecting with others, and allowing ourselves to know and understand what is going on with us, while processing the memories of trauma"[26] is a way "help survivors feel fully alive in the present," which again suggests to me the concept of wholeness.[27] This method likewise closely aligns with the spiritual care and intercultural model of compassionate listening and theological reflection that Doehring outlined. Moreover, the spiritual caregiver (in the case of this project, the caregiver refers to both clergy and the larger congregational ministry) can provide the safe, trusting environment van der Kolk talks about—one in which the care seeker can explore experiences they have been ashamed or afraid of, two emotions very common to narcissistic abuse survivors .[28] This process can result in more positive associations for the care seeker, helping to satisfy the caregiver's job of aiding the care seeker to tease out intentional, life-giving theologies, rather than relying on lived theologies embedded in memories of abuse.

Power and Privilege

In our efforts to make space to achieve wholeness after trauma, we cannot forget the social forces that complexify the healing process, such as when people begin to experience self-

[25] MacKenzie Jackson, *Psychopath Free: Recovering from emotionally abusive relationships with narcissists, sociopaths, and other toxic people* (New York: Random House, 2015), 157.
[26] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 3.
[27] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 3.
[28] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 298-305.

compassion which "is often accompanied by awareness of and sadness about life-limiting family, organizational, and social systems."[29] Indeed, the experiences of the narcissistic abuse survivor—including the severity and the duration of the abuse, as well as resources available for healing—are informed by the survivor's gender, race, sexual orientation, health, and socio-economic standing. Bell hooks points out the disparity in care for abuse survivors when she says, "White supremacy and patriarchy—forms of domination maintained by violence--. . .has divided us on the lines of bodies—black and brown bodies exploited, oppressed, and dominated by white bodies."[30] *Soul Repair*, in its exploration of moral injury, also recognizes the ways some bodies (based on race or socio-economic class) are targeted as expendable victims of trauma. Eve Ensler says that we have to understand how trauma "take(s) love out of the body, or at least make(s) it hard to have love in the body."[31] Thus, healing from narcissistic abuse becomes about finding the love that exists within the body, but, because

of the post-trauma re-wiring and hypervigilant responses that van der Kolk talks about, has become inaccessible to the survivor. Again, this idea gestures to the necessity for working toward wholeness and self-ownership.

A caregiver of UU faith could frame their understanding through this lens of finding love within: their "job" as caregiver is to re-connect trauma survivors to the love within themselves so that wholeness and self-ownership can be achieved. Throughout this process, however, there must be an understanding of the forces of oppression and domination that constantly work to disconnect the self from love. As bell hooks says, "Trust is part of what humanizes the

[29] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, 175.

[30] "Strike! Rise! Dance! bell hooks & Eve Ensler," Lion's Roar: Buddhist Wisdom for Our Time, June 18, 2014, https://web.archive.org/web/20220401015942/https://www.lionsroar.com/strike-rise-dance-bell-hooks-eve-ensler-march-2014/.

[31] Lion's Roar, "bell hooks & Eve Ensler."

dehumanizing relationship, because trust grows and takes place in the context of mutuality."[32] In the context of spiritual care it is through an honest awareness of power and privilege (from both the caregiver and care seeker's position) that the trust is fostered that allows the healing to begin.

Understanding Narcissism & Healing

As mentioned previously, because of the self-protective nature of narcissistic disorder, it is often quite difficult for people to come to the realization that they need treatment or that they have committed any wrongdoing. Perhaps as a result of this, survivors of narcissistic abuse have been analyzed less than those of other kinds of abuse. Hence, there are currently very few solid resources available on spiritual recovery from narcissistic abuse, an omission this project is intended to help rectify. While this project leans heavily on the work of Doehring and van der Kolk as the basis for caring for trauma survivors, I will also reference sources that both identify/explicate the specific problem of narcissism and those that offer strategies for coping with the aftermath of the abuse.

First, in considering how to convey the issue of narcissism as a personality disorder, *The Handbook of Narcissism and Narcissistic Personality Disorders: Theoretical approaches, empirical findings and treatments* is a seminal work with contributions by many of the top scholars in this field. It provides a wealth of information for understanding the basics of this disorder. While most of the literature on narcissistic abuse survivors is of the self-published and/or self-help variety of dubious scholarship, Shahida Arabi's *POWER: Surviving and Thriving After Narcissistic Abuse* is a welcome text directly exploring the subject of survivors;

[32] Lion's Roar, "bell hooks & Eve Ensler."

Arabi leans heavily on van der Kolk's work on trauma. This book is a useful source for exploring healing the emotional, psychological, and spiritual scars caused by narcissistic abuse. Jackson MacKenzie's *Psychopath Free: Recovering from Emotionally Abusive Relationships with Narcissists, Sociopath, and Other Toxic People* provides a solid overview of the process of survivor recovery. I also frequently reference Judith Herman's classic work *Trauma and Recovery* as another foundational text, this time directly rooted in the feminist movement, on which to better understand the healing process and how to build a spiritual response to it. Perhaps most controversially, I reference Dr. Bandy Lee's book on NPD as manifested in the Donald Trump administration. Dr. Lee also has a religious background (she holds an M.Div.) and makes the strong case that the nation has been in the throes of narcissistic abuse which has both psychological and spiritual ramifications. The inclusion of this text adds scope to the project so that it has resonance beyond individual healing to reflect a larger social need.

As mentioned previously, texts that deal specifically with spiritual recovery from narcissistic abuse are virtually non-existent. However, there are several texts that address spiritual healing from abuse as well as some that specifically explore the role of narcissism in spirituality. D. Capp's article on "God Diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder" can help to better understand the spiritual complexity of both the disorder and its abuse survivors. Chuck DeGroat's *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse* considers the narcissism that plays out in the church community itself, with an emphasis on spiritual healing. I have also referenced Craydon McDonald's look at the implications of narcissism for spiritual care.

Finally, while most of the spiritual practices explored in this project are based on my professional knowledge of these practices as they have been traditionally utilized in religious

communities, I have consulted Scott H. Alexander's book *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple pathways for enriching your life* as it is a fairly recent major publication exploring spiritual practices by drawing reflections from a wide spectrum of contemporary Unitarian Universalist leaders. Other texts consulted with regard to spiritual practices include Jon Kabat Zinn's *Mindfulness for Beginners*, Madeleine L'Engle's *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art*, and Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*. Frank Rogers Jr.'s *Practicing Compassion* serves as a foundational text for exploring compassion practices.

All in all, this topic represents an intersection of multiple topics of inquiry: the scientific and therapeutic understanding of trauma, the nature of narcissism and survivors of narcissistic abuse, the historical and contemporary understanding of trauma within the Unitarian Universalist community, and, finally, spiritual healing from narcissistic abuse. All of these topics inform the process of creating appropriate trauma responses for survivors within the UU parish setting.

Theological Understanding

This project is grounded in the cyclical connection between healthy, whole spiritual lives and healthy interpersonal and community connections. We are not whole spiritually if we have on-going or lasting unaddressed wounds from abusive relationships in our lives, and we are not able to have lives fully and meaningfully connected to others (such as in a church community) if we are not addressing our spiritual wounds. The project draws theologically on the work of Henri Nouwen, whose work reflects an intersecting approach of psychology, spirituality, and healthy relations. While Christian in his theology, Nouwen also speaks to basic humanist understandings that translate well to Unitarian Universalism. For instance, of his book *The Wounded Healer*, Nouwen writes, "Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether

physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not, 'How can we hide our wounds?' so we don't have to be embarrassed, but 'How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?' When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers."[33] In other words, the theology that drives this work is not just about personal healing, but how that healing ultimately provides service to others.

As a faith leader, I believe much of our power comes from a place of vulnerability common to the human condition and certainly known to survivors of narcissistic abuse. Thus, I will also be considering some key Unitarian Universalist theological voices from those who have been traditionally marginalized (women's voices and Black voices). Sharon Welch's *The Feminist Ethic of Risk* speaks deeply to me with its celebration of strategic risk taking which moves us out of an ethic of control and into a place of beautiful uncertainty. It is within this uncertainty, this vulnerability, that we can truly allow ourselves to love and be loved in return—a key component to healing from narcissistic abuse. Welch's work beckons us to be vulnerable enough to offer or accept help even within the complexities of recovering from abuse, and in so doing, we can find new ways to work in powerful solidarity.

We can find this sacred strength when we look where there is vulnerability because that is where, paradoxically, the most powerful moments of our existence take place, as seen in both joyful and sorrowful times. Moreover, we carry on, working for a more just world where abusers are held accountable and survivors are supported in their work toward healing, because, to paraphrase African American Humanist theologian Anthony Pinn, that is our best option, even if the results are uncertain and our progress is sometimes virtually immeasurable. Pinn's theological perspectives, particularly those found in *The End of God Talk*, invite us to consider

[33] Nouwen, "The Wounded Healer."

how to make space for bodies that have been historically marginalized and abused. In the context of this project, Pinn's work asks us to consider how Unitarian Universalist congregations can make space for abused, traumatized bodies to re-claim their spiritual power and begin to occupy the world once more with confidence and wholeness, secure in their sense of self-ownership.

Chapter Three: Unitarian Universalism & Abuse-rooted Trauma

Unitarian Universalism as a Trauma-informed Faith

The welcoming acceptance and inclusive spirit of Unitarian Universalism provides an ideal spiritual framework for responding to the needs of narcissistic abuse survivors. Many of the models of and much of the current literature on trauma reflect an attitude that is complementary to Unitarian Universalism's ideals of building an inclusive, justice-based community wise to the realities and challenges of the contemporary world. Through a thoughtful reflection on UUism's historical relationship to trauma as well as exploring the aims of our evolving and theologically flexible faith tradition, I will articulate a framework for narcissistic abuse responsive ministry grounded in both contemporary pastoral care theory and the ideologies and practices of today's Unitarian Universalism.

One of the strengths that is offered within our congregations for trauma healing is that Unitarian Universalism is an ever evolving faith, historically and contemporarily familiar with responding to the needs and concerns of the present moment. While it has its roots in the Protestant tradition, in the past seventy years or so, it has become decidedly Humanist in its shared outlook, while still making room for those individual members who may follow a personal spiritual path that is more theistic or rooted in an established religious tradition, whether it be Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, or another religion. What is shared collectively under the umbrella of this multi-faith tradition is a respect for Humanist values, expressed in the seven principles which currently articulate the most succinctly shared understanding of Unitarian Universalism among its diverse followers. Those principles span from respecting "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," to working for "justice, equity and compassion in human

relations," and finally to maintaining a "respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."[34]

The issue of lack of self-leadership characteristic of narcissistic abuse survivors is one that would be regarded as a serious concern by anyone looking at it through the framing provided by the seven principles. The principles move from the 1st Principle with its narrow focus on the individual up through the 7th Principle with the wide focus on the connection of everyone to everything. Intrinsic to all these principles is the notion of human agency: a person making choices in how they position themselves and act within the world. Self-empowerment and self-leadership is at the core of contemporary Unitarian Universalism, which is understandable after its century-long direct relationship with Humanism. Likewise, UUism has a long history of promoting rational thought and appreciating scientific study, so as a faith movement, it fully lifts up and acknowledges trauma response as a neurological--not just spiritual--reality.

Thus, Unitarian Universalism would understand this problem as a scientific reality that could also be understood as needing emotional and spiritual support. In this case, Unitarian Universalists would define spiritual as that which connects us to something greater than ourselves, though this is by no means limited to God. A UU might understand their feelings as spiritual if they feel connected to nature, their ancestors, or even their own intellect or creativity. Thus, the problem of lack of self-leadership is one that UUs would approach on both a practical level and a spiritual level that encourages the survivor to get in touch with whatever it is that helps them find a more expansive feeling, one offering meaning to their existence and connecting them to a greater framework than their individual self.

[34] "The Seven Principles," Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed April 4, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20220201172004/https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles.

Therefore, by examining recovery from narcissistic abuse from the multi-faith, multi-disciplinary, multi-spiritual perspective of Unitarian Universalism, I hope to create a "roadmap" for faith community leaders (of multiple religious identities) to identify resources within their own parish settings for survivors to find hope and healing in moving forward in their spiritual lives. By explaining narcissistic abuse in this context, this project adds to the body of resources that are helping faith leaders to become more familiar with this common but often unidentified form of abuse. This heightened awareness can help faith leaders to better create a pastoral atmosphere where congregants can share their personal narratives of narcissistic abuse perpetrated by parents, other relatives, bosses, clergy, dating relationships, spouses, etc. By being able to share their experiences with clergy who understand the trauma that comes from narcissistic abuse, they will begin to combat the isolated feeling known to many survivors. In turn, by being more educated about this issue, clergy can better invite them to reflect how the abuse has affected them spiritually: Did it test their faith? What spiritual practices have they found useful in their healing process? From what source have they found inner strength? Etc.

Trauma from an Historical Unitarian Universalist Perspective

Unitarian Universalism is the modern incarnation of two Protestant faith traditions (Unitarianism and Universalism) that merged sixty years ago. The traditions were primarily attracted to one another by shared values emphasizing social responsibility and freedom of thought with a heavy emphasis on rational thinking. From the 1960s to the 1990s (and beyond, for some congregations), many Unitarian Universalist communities eschewed overtly religious words like "God," "spiritual," and even, in some cases, "church." While the last thirty years have been marked by a conscious effort to reclaim UUism's evaporating spiritual component, this era of pervasive secular humanism has had marked effects. As congregations, we are still learning to

hold space not just for active social justice movements but also personal spiritual growth and healing. Likewise, our communities have been organized around the assumption that we consist primarily of a well-educated upper middle class white demographic not culturally inclined to lean upon others during traumatic periods in their lives. This means that, outside of major catastrophes or similar disastrous events, Unitarian Universalists are perhaps even more inclined than the larger culture to overlook the presence of personal trauma within our communities. Furthermore, this de-emphasis of the spiritual within our tradition has made us inclined to refer survivor care seekers to appropriate help outside our faith community without first considering how we might offer them a trauma response grounded within our faith tradition.

Unitarian Universalism has historically focused on the perfecting of human beings through cultivating the intellect and achieving salvation by character; while conceived with noble intentions, this focus on achievement and excellence has problematized our honest reckoning of and response to trauma. In the Transcendentalist period of Unitarianism, for instance, the belief arose that each human being has a spark of divinity within them. This was the impetus for Unitarianism to begin consciously recognizing the worth of each and every individual, whatever their race, disability, gender, etc. This notion paved the way for Unitarian Universalist work in social services, education, mental illness, and so on. At the same time, even as our focus on divinity within each person compelled us to better care for one another, it also positioned us to be more inclined to look primarily toward the potential in a given person, rather than fully acknowledging their present vulnerabilities.

As Humanism found its way into our movement in the early 20th Century, this emphasis on human empowerment became even more central to our self-understanding. We became more inclined to see trauma as primarily the result of systemic abuses or natural disasters rather than

disturbingly common life occurrences such as personal abuse scenarios. Thus, our trauma responses became grounded in bettering the conditions that lead to trauma, rather than focusing on offering spiritual responses to those already traumatized.

Unitarian Universalist Areas for Growth in Understanding Trauma

In the past few years, our tradition has become engaged in painful but enriching dialogue about power and privilege. We have become acutely aware of the ways in which Unitarian Universalism has understood and engaged with the world that have been based in the white supremacist attitudes and ideas that invisibly but potently surround us—attitudes and ideas that are often 'first cousins' to the characteristics of narcissism. The idea that most people are un-traumatized, unless they have been affected by a large-scale disaster or discrete act of exceptional violence, ignores the traumatic experiences built into the everyday lives of marginalized people. Privilege—specifically, white privilege--has allowed us too often to omit traumatized individuals from our field of vision within our UU communities. Rather than fully reckon with the pain and brokenness that exists within our midst, we have often turned away from rawness of emotion toward intellectualism and individualism, and in so doing, have unintentionally driven away people of diverse identities.

This lingering narrow perception of trauma and recovery from abuse can be seen today by visiting the website of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the organization that connects UU communities across the globe. The two main webpages devoted to this topic frame trauma as a condition arising after uncommon incidents like school shootings and hurricanes, with the emphasis of the trauma response centered upon offering resources to children and families.[35] Of

[35] "Handling Trauma in the Aftermath of Disaster," Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed May 9, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20210304064111/https://www.uua.org/safe/response.

note is this focus on trauma response in children; this can be understood as a reflection of our long reluctance to fully acknowledge the traumatic wounds carried by the adults in our midst. These pages on the UUA website do not even conceive of trauma and abuse as part of the average human experience; it is reserved only for large catastrophes and unique acts of great violence, not the subtleties and complexities of something like narcissistic abuse.

Likewise, the Unitarian Universalist Trauma Response Ministry (UUTRM), our one and only organization dedicated to trauma response, describes its purpose as providing "spiritual care to survivors of mass disasters and other significant trauma."[36] UUTRM is very clear in its mission, saying it is "designed for the acute phase of a critical incident or disaster."[37] UUTRM serves a noble purpose and there is certainly nothing ill-conceived in their mission or function; they simply illustrate that the major existing UU organizations do not have a history or stated mission of acknowledging and responding to trauma unless it comes as the result of a large-scale event.

Moreover, the main emphasis of our current and historical trauma response is one of matching trauma survivors with appropriate outside resources; there has been little if any widely understood conception of Unitarian Universalism *itself* as a healing religious response to the trauma that comes from something like narcissistic abuse. In other words, there has been a notable disregard for utilizing the components and resources available within the faith tradition and congregations as a trauma response. We have been uncomfortable with the reality of trauma and abuse in peoples' lives and have underestimated Unitarian Universalism's potential to offer some measure of spiritual and emotional healing. One can argue that in our general

[36] "About Us," UU Trauma Response Ministry, accessed May 9, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20220401024307/https://www.uutrm.org/about/.

[37] "About Us," UU Trauma Response Ministry.

movement away from shared theism and overtly spiritual language and practices, we have also lost confidence in our capacity to meet the deep spiritual needs of our wounded and traumatized membership.

Trauma from a Contemporary Unitarian Universalist Perspective

Fortunately, in the past few years, this oversight has begun to be named and recognized. Back in 2017, in a regional blog posted to the UUA website, UUA staff member David Pyle very publicly and pointedly asked, "Does your congregation provide trauma support to members?"[38] In 2019, Leslie Takahashi utilized the annual high profile event of the Berry Street Essay to call Unitarian Universalist ministers to trauma-informed ministries as a way of dismantling white supremacy within our communities.[39] Most recently, in response to the COVID experience of recent years, UUA leaders like Sunshine Jeremiah Wolfe are offering trauma responses to this crisis that also publicly acknowledge the past traumas that so many carry.[40] From the less wide-reaching pulpits of their individual congregations, countless other Unitarian Universalist ministers and prophetic speakers have also been recently addressing this under-acknowledged topic.

Ultimately then, at its best Unitarian Universalism identifies and comforts traumatized people and then compassionately connects them with appropriate aid outside the community. At its worst, it does not fully conceive of the on-going effects of trauma, the prevalence of trauma in the everyday lives of people, or the active presence of traumatized people in its own

[38] David Pyle, "Does Your Congregation Provide Trauma Support to Members," Unitarian Universalist Association, October 9, 2017, https://web.archive.org/web/20220401030818/https://www.uua.org/central-east/blog/better-together/does-your-congregation-provide-trauma-support-members.

[39] Leslie Takahashi, "Truth, Trauma and Transformation," Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, May 9, 2021, www.uuma.org/resource/resmgr/bse/truth,_trauma_and_transforma.pdf.

[40] Sunshine Jeremiah Wolfe, "Trauma Response and COVID," Unitarian Universalist Association, Vimeo Video, March 18, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20210522040107/https://www.uua.org/leadership/library/multi-platform-trauma.

congregations, outside of specific community-wide incidents of disaster or violence. As an organized faith, we have not even begun to publicly reckon with the complexity of abuse in peoples' daily lives; narcissistic abuse has barely even entered the conversation. As Unitarian Universalism works to free itself from the chains of white patriarchal norms (and this has been some of our primary work as of late), it will need to consider how trauma from abuse plays out in our midst. Are our clergy and laity aware of and sensitive to the trauma that is found in their very congregations? Do we offer a faith experience robust enough to provide a spiritual response to trauma? Are we prepared--under the multi-faith umbrella that hangs over the full spectrum of atheists, agnostics, and theists represented in our communities—to wrestle with the complexities of formulating trauma responses that are reflective of our uniquely amorphous and ever evolving faith tradition?

These questions are not proposed with the intention of undermining or ignoring the work of the many clergy and lay leaders in our communities who already compassionately and thoughtfully provide pastoral care to traumatized and abused individuals. Rather, it is to say that we could do better in crafting a more intentional, clearly articulated framework for responding to trauma from narcissistic abuse—one grounded in our guiding principles, making room for the spectrum of theological beliefs that exist within our community. And, make no mistake, this is indeed the work of community; UU theologian Anthony Pinn sees community in the religious context not just as a place for relationships or shared rituals, but as a place that "involves recognition of the integrity of the quest for complex subjectivity."[41] In other words, we come together in community to express what is of greatest worth for us, to demonstrate and live out how we understand and make meaning of the world. As we consider a nation of people affected

[41]Anthony Pinn, *The End of God Talk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 41.

by the trauma of narcissistic abusive political leadership, along with the greater cultural understanding of the prevalence of the personal traumas that inform peoples' lives (sexual harassment, various forms of abuse, neglect [physical and emotional], abuse based on sexual orientation or gender identity, and so on), we can better position ourselves to be a truly trauma-informed Unitarian Universalist ministry. In the case of this project, a trauma response plan for narcissistic abuse survivors is the focus, but clearly, there are various areas crying out for similar attention.

Chapter 4: Creating a Narcissistic Abuse Survivor Trauma-Informed Parish Ministry

Grounded in an intercultural care model rooted in an understanding of the latest trauma theory, as well as a rigorous understanding of how the UU tradition has recently and historically responded to trauma, we now explore how clergy and congregations can create ministries that offer tools and experiences that can be spiritually healing for survivors. This is the center of this work, an opportunity for survivors to find hope and healing.

The Spiritual Well-being of Clergy & Caregivers

In *Soul Repair,* Brock and Lettini say that listening to a trauma survivor "requires patience with their silence and with the confusion, grief, anger, and shame it carries. We must be willing to listen carefully without judgement and without a personal agenda. . .Finally, we must be willing to engage their moral and theological questions with openness and to journey with them as we are mutually transformed in the process."[42] This concept of mutual transformation is a natural by-product of the work of co-creation that Doehring talks about throughout *The Practice of Pastoral Care*. Ultimately, the work of caring for others provides an important reminder to the caregiver of their own journey toward wholeness as a human being. The surprise inherent to spiritual caregiving is that while clergy give of their presence to others, if they truly compassionately take in what they are experiencing, they themselves are also changed by it. In my experiences in pastoral counseling or facilitating grief and depression groups, I have so often come away nourished and wiser by what I have experienced. My engagement as a caregiver also keeps me accountable to "practice what I preach," as the saying goes. Because the framework I have discussed here is grounded within my own tradition, I feel like each element offers me a way of staying spiritually nourished even when I am on the giving side of the equation.

[42] Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, conclusion.

Nonetheless, I recognize that caregivers can reach places of spiritual burn-out and disconnect. Having a solid understanding of the neuroscience of trauma as well as recognizing the boundaries of spiritual care is key to not getting in over one's head.

In the end, my faith tradition of Unitarian Universalism is only beginning to integrate the realities of trauma into the way our communities understand themselves and their purpose. However, many of the raw materials—from our worship services, small group ministries, and pastoral care opportunities—are already in place to provide helpful a trauma response to those in need. Unitarian Universalism may be a tradition that skewed primarily toward rationalism in the 20th century, but nonetheless, the beating spiritual heart of our tradition remains alive and open, honoring the individual experiences and theological paths of each and every person within our communities. Within that beating heart is the call to care for one another—and this call invites us to fully embracing our capabilities as spiritual caregivers to trauma survivors.

Spiritually Healing Resources for Survivors in the Parish Setting

In the proceeding chapters, I have explored a framework for creating a UU trauma response plan. That framework is characterized by a deep respect for scientific insight on trauma, a recognition of the importance of anti-racism and anti-oppression lenses as a healing force in this work, an appreciation for the general sense of goodness that pervades the primary liberal theologies of UUism, and a recognition that the loving presence of others (individually and in community) is central to achieving wholeness and self-ownership. This framework is certainly adaptable to multiple Unitarian Universalist settings and is also adaptable to other faith communities—but what might it look like within my own congregation? What resources or practices are already present and available?

In this chapter, I will explore how to consider what resources might be already available that can be used to aid in spiritual healing for narcissistic abuse survivors. Sometimes these resources simply need minor changes to become healing tools for survivors. Other resources may need significant modification or might not be currently present in any form within the congregation's ministry. In the Appendices, I have also included samples of how some elements, such as worship services, can be adapted to become spaces for survivor spiritual healing. My hope is that by grounding clergy in a scientific understanding of trauma and educating them about narcissistic abuse, they can then use their creativity and prophetic voices to more directly address the needs of abuse survivors. Thus, nothing here should be taken as the *only* acceptable trauma response option, but rather, they should serve as a model to invite clergy to consider what they might do within the context of their own ministry, available practical resources, and creative gifts.

Ultimately, the elements I have chosen as spiritually healing ones have been selected because they offer some movement toward healing for the survivor. It might be that the practice offers them (or others) an opportunity to name what they have experienced within a setting or context that feels supportive and safe. Or the practice might help them find connections with other people or a nourishing spiritual source, such as God or creation itself. And certainly many of these practices are designed to help the survivor gain a sense of self-ownership—the sense that they are in charge of their mind, heart, and body, rather than living at the whim of trauma triggers. Spiritually healing components can return a survivor to a sense of being at home in their body, at peace with their thoughts and emotions—even finding beauty in their inner world, despite the after effects of the abuse. Ultimately, there is no one formula that will work for every

survivor; truly trauma-informed ministries recognize that there are multiple avenues toward spiritual healing, and it is of value to explore as many as congregational resources allow.

Worship

We begin with worship since worship services are usually the heart and center of the parish setting. There is rarely another regularly scheduled experience in congregational life where clergy can so profoundly move a congregation; it is a place where clergy can give voice to pressing concerns, assured of a level of attention that they would not necessarily receive in another setting. What is lifted up as important in worship carries a weight that is rarely attained outside the pulpit. Thus, in the often overlooked area of narcissistic abuse, clergy have the power of the pulpit to use their prophetic and pastoral voices to create spaces of hope and healing for abuse survivors. The communal aspect of this experience is particularly valuable for connectedness because "it conveys safeness, stimulates positive affect and affiliation, and the psychobiological impact of safe-connectedness has far-reaching impacts on multiple healing processes within the body."[43] Ultimately, clergy have an opportunity in worship to do two primary things in addressing narcissistic abuse: one) to utilize sermons to educate the congregation about narcissism, its effects, and healing responses to its damage and two) to create trauma-informed worship experiences that allow communal, community-supported space offering healing for survivors, or at least modelling some of the tools survivors can utilize for the on-going healing process.

[43] Paul Gilbert and Hannah Gilbert, "Spiritual healing in the context of the human need for safeness, connectedness and warmth: a biopsychosocial approach," in *Spiritual Healing: Scientific and Religious Perspectives,* ed. Fraser N. Watts (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 116-117.

Preaching

Preaching is the first component of worship that I will explore. With the effects of narcissism on survivors often downplayed or ignored in the general culture, survivors can struggle to name and understand the experience they had. It is not uncommon for them to arrive at a congregation having been through the confusing experience of being manipulated, gas-lit, and constantly undermined, leaving them feeling uncertain of how to understand their perplexing experience. By preaching on the subjects of narcissism and narcissistic abuse, clergy can begin to educate their congregations on this topic so that survivors can begin to identify themselves as such. After all, as van der Kolk says, "If you've been hurt, you need to acknowledge and name what happened to you,"[44] but one needs the pertinent knowledge and language to even begin this process of acknowledgement.

In today's world, the pulpit is not necessarily seen as a primary source of education; most Unitarian Universalists have internet access readily available to them where they can look up any topic with a few keystrokes. Likewise, most of our congregations are well-educated, so there has been a conscious (and welcome) shift in recent decades from "lecture style" sermons toward more heartfelt spiritual approaches. However, in the case of a topic like narcissism that affects the lives of so many people but nonetheless remains somewhat misunderstood even among the well-educated, the pulpit can be an ideal place to convey much needed information. That is not to say that spiritual components are not welcome alongside educational information when preaching on this topic. It is important to make certain that a sermon on narcissism leaves space for the reality of the spectrum of experiences of those listening to it: someone may be a recent survivor of this form of abuse and just learning about it formally for the first time; someone else

[44] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 409.

may have been working with a therapist and this is familiar but nonetheless still emotionally evocative territory; someone else may be concerned that they see the characteristics of the abuser in their own actions; and someone else might see parallels between this knowledge and what is happening on a larger scale with politicians and other public figures. Effective preaching on this topic recognizes both the need for education on narcissism's terminology, characteristics, effects, and the emotional energy connected to the topic. See Appendix A for an example of a sermon on narcissism that attempts to create space in worship for all of these intentions and potential responses.

Nonetheless, a preacher must tread carefully when exploring a challenging topic like this in the worship setting. As an example, when I delivered the sermon shared in the Appendices, a congregant approached me afterward to express her dismay and outrage. While she felt like the topic was an important one and she did not necessarily disagree with the information that had been conveyed, she had nevertheless felt emotionally ambushed by the frank tackling of the subject; in the initial post-service conversation, she said that she "didn't come to church to hear about that sort of thing." In this case, the situation at hand ended up being an opportunity to explore pastorally with her what was so triggering about the service. Unsurprisingly, it was revealed that there was tension within her own family that centered around a member that appeared to have these narcissistic characteristics. Hearing about something that hit so close to home in such a painful way was understandably difficult for her during what was usually a time of comforting Sunday morning worship. Yet, she ultimately (after a couple of pastoral sessions) was able to take what she had learned and felt, and utilize it to have a more empowered response to this family member's behavior. Likewise, addressing the issue within the church setting

allowed her to begin the process of spiritual healing rather than attempting to leave the issue outside the church door (a form of escapism).

Thus, as clergy considers weaving this topic into their sermons, it will be vitally important to consider how to also provide trauma-informed aftercare. A deeper exploration of the role of pastoral care in aiding survivors is addressed in a later section.

Ritual

Sermons aren't the only method by which the needs of survivors can be addressed. The use of ritual in worship can be a key component to providing opportunities for healing that are grounded in the spiritual rather than the intellectual. While it may seem self-evident how much spiritual healing power worship can have, many of the cerebral types who find their way to our congregations approach them intellectually. What might it look like if clergy took more time to explain how a worshipper might more effectively utilize the time of silent meditation during the service, for instance? (Instead of wondering what the sermon was going to be about, or, more likely still, what might be waiting for them at lunchtime.) Or how might a worshipper better consciously see the experience of the service not just as a time designed to stimulate the intellect, but one designed to remind them of the important human connections in their lives? Furthermore, what might be the response of worshippers in consciously seeking out the service as a way of connecting to something greater than themselves, something healing and life-affirming, some source of divine love?

As we know from our exploration of a UU trauma response framework, these are all essential components of the trauma recovery process. While these elements are certainly currently present in our worship services, there is little conscious understanding from our congregation as to the deeper reasons of why we engage in such practices as group meditation or

holding hands while singing. Yet, "one of the clearest lessons from contemporary neuroscience is that our sense of ourselves is anchored in a vital connection with our bodies"[45] which means that for the worship experience to truly offer a place of experiencing wholeness, we cannot ignore the physical realities of our bodies within the space. Utilizing our existing (and always limited and understaffed) resources to respond to trauma would mean doing a better job of helping our congregants enter worship as a place of fully embodied healing, rather than just a place of intellectual edification, and rituals involving engagement with the body can be one way to effectively do so. Rituals during worship can be geared toward "restoring balance or removing destructive energies, but can also be seen as offering types of connectedness that may stimulate conditions in the person that are conducive to healing."[46]

Unitarian Universalist communities are familiar with rituals involving some touch, tactile experiences, and movement like bread communions, the annual water communion, the sharing of personal joys and sorrows, and so on. But until fairly recently, space was not often made in worship for more open-ended rituals designed to deepen understandings of wounding and pain and foster spiritual healing. At a congregation where I served as Assistant Minister, we spent a portion of each Sunday service allowing people to come to the chancel while meditative music played. They were then invited to light candles or drop a colored stone into a large glass container filled with water. This contemplative time was designed as an opportunity for congregants to get in deeper touch with whatever they might be feeling, and it was not uncommon to see tears in the eyes of participants. On certain occasions, this act of embodying inward spirituality revealed deep trauma that the church's pastoral care team was able to follow up about later. Thus, this ritual ended up serving two primary purposes: allowing space for

[45] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 479.
[46] Gilbert and Gilbert, "Spiritual Healing," 118.

congregants to channel their pain into an embodied ritual that could take on meaning personal to them; and to alert the clergy and pastoral care team to someone who was experiencing deep pain or difficulty. Ritual in worship can offer people a place to take off the mask that polite society often requires them to wear and reveal more about their interior emotional and spiritual lives. This intentional contemplative space that invites movement and participation can begin to open up that which otherwise might be locked behind walls of shame, guilt, or confusion. For survivors of narcissistic abuse who are often dealing with levels of complexity in their experiences that make them difficult to talk about in casual conversation, ritual during worship can provide a safe space to begin to grapple with some of these difficult feelings without feeling the pressure to put them into words.

Beyond this kind of generalized ritual, clergy can also make space in worship for even more specified ritualistic responses to narcissistic abuse. In Appendix B, I present a ritual that utilizes multiple speakers to give voice to the spectrum of experiences narcissistic abuse survivors might have. This gives congregants an opportunity to better understand the full spectrum of experiences survivors have and begin to consider where their own experiences might fall. In the second part of the ritual, survivors engage their bodies by coming forward to add a pinch of salt (a tactile opportunity) to a communal bowl of water while meditative music plays. In a metaphorical sense, the participants are giving back the sting of their wounds (in the form of salt) to the ocean. Words of affirmation are spoken that acknowledge the pain that has been expressed and the movement toward healing. Finally, the worship leader adds blue food coloring to the bowl, symbolizing the transformation of this pain back into the natural element of the blue ocean (and providing positive visual stimuli).

This ritual is by no means the only way in which narcissistic abuse survivors can be offered space for healing during worship; it is simply an example of one creative approach worship leaders can adapt to their own setting and congregational culture. The most important aspects in creating any worship to address this form of abuse are threefold: one) To consider the depth and breadth of experiences survivors might be bringing to the sanctuary; two) To consider an opportunity to embody the act of spiritual healing by moving out of the mind and utilizing the body; and three) To make space for the pain that surfaces but also make sure the ritual gestures toward a larger source of healing and hope that is available beyond the pain suffered from the abuse. Metaphor (such as seen in this "sea" ritual) can be a powerful way to hold space for the wounded heart as it invites in the possibility of spiritual healing.

Prayer

The third and final area of worship I will explore is prayer. Communal prayer in worship is another area that can offer spiritual healing for narcissistic abuse survivors. In worship services, Unitarian Universalist prayers are rarely petitionary prayers asking God for specific requests; but rather, they tend to be ways of communally acknowledging what is of greatest value or concern to us as a community. Since our congregants identify as theists, atheists, and agnostics, communal prayers often leave space for the listener to individually identify to whom or what the prayers are directed. It is very much part of the UU culture to name our concerns about social ills and injustices in prayer, but rarely do we acknowledge the kind of abuse that someone might have suffered at the hands of a narcissist. We are only just beginning to utilize terms like gas-lighting, emotional manipulation, etc. in our worship, and it will be up to worship leaders to make a conscious effort to begin incorporating more specific awareness of issues like narcissistic abuse into their prayer practices.

This inclusion is valuable for there is great power in a communal prayer that is willing to name the specific struggles congregants have faced. Sometimes we shy away from this practice, perhaps in the effort to remain universal. But generalized prayer is only effective up to a point. In prayer, we speak what is foremost on our minds and in our hearts, and, for a survivor, it can be profoundly meaningful to hear their own struggle named in a prayer in the midst of a room occupied by fellow members of their beloved community, for "to hold traumatic reality in consciousness requires a social context that affirms and protects the victim and that joins victim and witness in a common alliance."[47] The existence of that common alliance can be signaled to the survivor through this act of communal prayer, reminding them that their experience and journey toward healing is acknowledged with great respect and seriousness by both clergy and community.

In Appendix C, I have included a sample prayer addressing narcissistic abuse that could be shared during a worship service.

Pastoral Systems

Most church communities, whether Unitarian Universalist or other, have a significant portion of their energies devoted to pastoral care systems. In a parish pastoral system, the first and most obvious resource available is the presence of a trauma-informed, narcissistic abuse educated congregational pastor. Most clergy offer individual pastoral care sessions to those who request them, inviting people to come to them with a particular issue of concern. The trauma-informed minister—and specifically, the narcissistic abuse informed minister—can work to identify those who might be survivors of this form of abuse. When there is discussion of self-esteem issues stemming from a toxic relationship, when a congregant's world seems to have

[47] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 26.

become small during or after a difficult relationship, when they speak of past or current relationships in puzzling, disturbing terms, then they might very well be a survivor of narcissistic abuse. The role of clergy is not to diagnose, of course, but rather, the responsible pastor can simply sharpen their awareness through gaining familiarity with this possibility. The good news is that any of the care techniques described here make space for healing whatever the actual diagnosis might be. It does not matter so much that the pastor knows they are dealing with a case of narcissistic abuse; rather, the point is that they are open to it as one possibility, and allow room within a pastoral session for a potential survivor to share, weep, and otherwise emote accordingly.

The pastoral invitation for survivors in the congregational setting can often be made more explicit by a minister making it known that they are willing to be a caring listening presence to those who have suffered narcissistic abuse. This is necessary for healing because "sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of a meaningful world."[48] Doehring's model is founded on the idea of deeply and compassionately listening to these personal narratives grounded in a relationship built on trust. In general, any successful pastoral session will include an assessment of how power and privilege come into play as well as an identification of spiritual and other themes shared by the survivor which are then positively reflected back to them by the pastor. Finally, through all these practices, along with the incorporation of prayer and other mindful spiritual practices, a spiritual care provider can work with the survivor toward the wholeness that comes from feeling reconnected to whatever source sustains them (God, the goodness of life, creation's majesty and possibility, etc.).

[48] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 151.

One of the bedrock truths of pastoral care as professional, responsible clergy is knowing and acknowledging one's limitations and having boundaries that keep pastoral care in the spiritual realm without providing the kind of specific therapy that should be left to other experts. Because of Unitarian Universalism's deep faith in science and the gifts of the secular world, and because our membership is made up of a good portion of atheists and agnostics alongside pragmatic theists, one of my earliest responses to someone who has experienced significant trauma that resembles narcissistic abuse is to encourage them to also seek professional help from an appropriate counselor, psychologist, psychiatrist, or therapist. This 'disclaimer' is an important part of a responsible pastoral intervention; in the culture of Unitarian Universalism (and other similar progressive traditions), a verbal recognition of the pastor's limitations as a spiritual caregiver is not only appreciated but necessary to gaining the trust of the often highly educated (and sometimes authority-skeptical) individuals who comprise these congregations. By acknowledging limitations and recommending further help from qualified experts, responsible clergy can begin spiritual care for abuse survivors by fostering the compassionate respect and trust gaining that is central to the successful spiritual caregiving situation.[49]

This honest acknowledgement of the pastor and congregation's strengths and limitations is especially important for developing a meaningful, honest, and authentic relationship with a survivor of narcissistic abuse. This aspect cannot be underestimated, for the survivor of narcissistic abuse is seeking help from a destructive relationship with someone who "is always out of touch with himself and others; while he may be charming or ingratiating, this personality is a false self, which protects the true self from shame and exposure."[50] A survivor is likely to

[49] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, 41.

[50] Chuck DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing your community from emotional and spiritual abuse* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), 35.

understandably have a heightened sensitivity to any person they see as exhibiting even mildly narcissistic traits, so it is important that clergy undertake this work from a place of humbleness and authenticity.

Once some understanding of the limitations and scope of spiritual care has been established, the spiritual care session itself can begin. While this feeling of lack of self-leadership is central to the experience of the traumatized individual, it is nonetheless one that can be mitigated with a thoughtful, multi-layered spiritual care plan. In the case of a narcissistic abuse survivor, one can identify three areas to be explored by the spiritual care practitioner: One) Mindfulness technique with emphasis on body response awareness. Two) Exploration and affirmation of supportive relationships. And Three) Examination of the survivor's relationship to something greater, divine or otherwise.

Similarly, van der Kolk explores the importance of mindfulness "by encouraging students to observe what is happening in different parts of the body."[51] Certainly, this element is easily adaptable to a spiritual care situation, and, like van der Kolk's work, mindfulness is grounded in a scientific foundation. For the Unitarian Universalist care giver, the importance of all of van der Kolk's work cannot be overstated: it ultimately affirms that trauma has real, scientifically provable effects on the brain and that offering a positive, loving, compassionate presence grounded in mindfulness practices is not just a way of being kind but actually can provide real areas of healing that can lead to wholeness. Moreover, opening up to others can help the care seeker re-connect to their community, and being connected to community is central to UUism's understanding of a whole, balanced life.

[51] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 272.

Mindfulness practices are in keeping with the UU tradition in that they have therapeutic value that has been scientifically proven, besides having long histories in multiple faith traditions. (Mindfulness will be explored more deeply in a later section.) A pastor might help someone begin to recover their sense of self-leadership by starting a pastoral session with a guided meditation focused on mindful breathing: "Now notice your breath. . . . Feel it coming in and out of your lungs. . . . Pay attention to where your body feels tense. . . ." etc. Van der Kolk writes that "at the core of recovery is self-awareness" and "body awareness puts us in touch with our inner world."[52] The person struggling with self-leadership is feeling disconnected from their inner world; by helping them engage in mindfulness practices that put them in touch with the physical realities of how their bodies are responding, they can begin to also get in touch with what is happening in their brains. In this case, their brain is continuing to send out confusing reactive emotional responses as though the abuse is still occurring. A mindfulness practice can be a way to begin to help them be in greater touch with their feelings, even those that are frightening.

Another area to focus on with the survivor is investigating and affirming the positive, supporting, and nurturing relationships in their life, especially relationships with those people who understand that "the story of trauma is a story about the storm that does not go away."[53] Who can they turn to for a listening ear who will understand the way the narcissistic abuse still reverberates through their life? Who in their life offers practical support? Whose words and voices are comforting? Who accepts them as they are and believes their story of abuse, who sees through the 'two-faced' nature of the narcissist abuser? Certainly, as spiritual caregiver, a pastor

[52] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 210.

[53] Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), Kindle, chap. 5.

can serve as something of a model for the kind of support people need in their lives. As Doehring says, "trust deepens when care seekers sense that caregivers will respect the mystery of who they are."[54] So, too, in their own lives survivors must identify those who will honor and affirm their unique identities and experiences, and as a spiritual caregiver grounded in a tradition that encourages human beings to be their best selves, UU clergy are both called and equipped to help them to identify those support people in their lives.

These relationships are essential to returning someone to a place of self-leadership because without the support of others, it is very likely a survivor will continue to live in a place of fear; after all, "managing your terror all by yourself gives rise to another set of problems: disassociation, despair, addictions, a chronic sense of panic, and relationships that are marked by alienation, disconnection, and explosions."[55] In other words, in trying to manage trauma-based fear alone out of a wish to stay in control of oneself, a person is led to the opposite place; without proper support from other human beings, they will instead end up lacking self-leadership and be held hostage by destructive behaviors and feelings. In *Soul Repair*, the authors say, "As every story in this book makes clear, veterans need the love, respect, and support of friends and family who know them personally and will accompany them on the long struggle to recover from war."[56] We can replace the word "war" with any kind of trauma, such as narcissistic abuse, for like those who survive the violence of war, any trauma survivor will need key supportive relationships in order to quell their fears and move into a place where they are able to once again feel in charge of themselves.

[54] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care*, 2.
[55] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 212.
[56] Brock and Lettini, *Soul Repair*, 99.

Finally, the Unitarian Universalist tradition calls clergy to invite this person to see their experience and existence as part of something greater. Shelly Rambo gives the name "the middle" to "the space in which persons find themselves in the aftermath of trauma."[57] For Rambo, this middle space is occupied by a middle spirit, one that holds both life and death within it (as trauma itself does), and, in so doing, connects the survivor to God in the midst of post-trauma turmoil.[58] While Rambo's overtly Christian theology does not work for all (or even most) Unitarian Universalists, I am nonetheless taken with her conception of this middle space, one that is marked by the ambiguity of both life and death and that recognizes that life's joys are tinged with pain as well as pleasure. This notion is one that I explore often in my UU ministry: encouraging people not to be afraid to move within spaces of ambiguity and uncertainty because it is inevitable that we each will, at some point, find ourselves in just such a space.

Thus, much of the focus of the pastoral care I would offer someone who is dealing with trauma would be an invitation for them to explore what they remain connected to in the place of the uncertainty they find themselves in at the moment: Is it God? Is it community? Is it gratitude for all creation? Is it appreciation for their own imaginations or intellects? Is it recognition of the value of their own moral compass or conscience? As a spiritual caregiver, my job is to help them go through the process of "evaluating their beliefs, conserving life-giving values and beliefs, setting aside those that are life-limiting, [and] sometimes claiming new values and beliefs."[59] By exploring the survivor's conception of their connection to something greater, we can begin to move them into a place of feeling more empowered to take control of their own self. No longer

[57] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 114.
[58] Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 114-117.
[59] Doehring, *Practice of Pastoral Care,* 90.

at the mercy of fear, someone who understands and feels their connection to something larger than themselves can begin the work of claiming self-leadership rather than simply being reactive.

Pastoral Care Session

In considering a scenario where this plan might be effective, I offer a situation I have encountered a few times: a congregant who was married to a spouse who exhibited the narcissistic traits of gas-lighting and undermining self-esteem. One such person connected any minor disagreement within a committee meeting with this narcissistic relationship. In this case, when I was faced with this person (still in a highly reactive state after a meeting where they experienced minor conflict as a great personal blow), I witnessed that he seemed markedly different in demeanor and behavior than the person I usually encountered. Later, when he was feeling less reactive, he shared that because of this past trauma, certain phrases or words during even minor disagreements "took him out of himself" and he was unhappy with feeling that he was no longer in control of himself (lack of self-leadership) in those moments.

In this case, I did discover that this person had a therapist helping him through some of his traumatic experiences. I could certainly see following through with a plan similar to what I laid out in the previous section of this paper. Because we are already in relationship, this congregant and I could begin with a guided mindfulness meditation to help him get in better touch with his body so that he could have more tools to access during these periods of hyperarousal. As van der Kolk says, "when you deliberately take a few, slow breaths, you will notice the effects of the parasympathetic brake on your arousal;" this sort of understanding and practice could be highly beneficial for this care seeker the next time he encounters a triggering piece of music. Rather than simply giving in to the reactive response, he could practice this breathing technique and perhaps feel more agency and control. Likewise, during less intense

times, this technique could help him to feel more in touch with his emotions, and thus more able to talk about them.

Next, we could spend time talking through the supportive relationships in his life. Where does he find nurturing and support? Who has he been able to honestly talk to about this difficult relationship? With whom does he feel like he becomes his best self? Who can he go to when he is feeling triggered? In this case, the attentiveness of the caregiver is key. Even though there was an established relationship already present in this example, Nouwen reminds us to refrain from "saying that a lifesaving relationship cannot develop in an hour. One eye movement or one handshake can replace years of friendship when man is in agony. Love not only lasts forever, it needs only a second to come about."[60] Again, the idea here is to be a loving presence and lead the care seeker back to a place where he doesn't feel hostage to these trauma-response emotions, but instead, feels that he has a contemporarily rich life with multiple avenues/people he can pursue for support. If this knowledge is keenly and truly felt, then it too can help him to feel in charge of himself.

Finally, we would explore the question of what he connects to that is greater than himself. In this case, I know the person would not be open to the idea of God (he also had past religious trauma centered around a narcissistic pastor), so we would instead focus on what he believes in that is greater than himself: Is it the relational power of love alive and well in the world today? Is it the seemingly endless scope of one's creative imagination? Is it the power of the intellect to discover new knowledge? Is it the depth of compassion aroused by conscience when we help another human being? Whatever his answers are, the idea here is to help him let

[60] Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 107.

go of "the blinders of habitual life-limiting embedded values" and instead embrace "the goodness, beauty, and mystery of life that connects all of creation."

Pastoral Care in Small Group Formats

Some congregations offer small groups that serve to provide pastoral care in a group setting; in my own congregation, we currently offer two groups dedicated to mental health concerns, each of which is led by me. One is our Grief & Caregivers Group, dedicated to those who are struggling to recover from the death or decline of a loved one. The other is our Sadness, Anxiety, and Depression (SAD) Group designed for anyone experiencing some level of these challenging feelings. Both groups are designed as "drop in" groups, available monthly for those who feel they need them. While neither is specifically designed as a support group for narcissistic abuse survivors, I am well aware that this issue is present in the lives of the participants. Sometimes it emerges as those in the bereavement group speak of a deceased family member; sometimes the characteristics of what appears to be a narcissistic relationship comes out in sharing during the SAD group. Both groups are often notable for having many of the participants share their concerns about what they see happening in the public sphere, especially politicians and pundits who exhibit malignant narcissistic traits. Ultimately, I have realized that these kinds of groups are excellent vehicles to provide space for wounded survivor hearts to find healing.

To create that space, the group facilitator is mostly charged with keeping the safe space and allowing sharing and group support to take place. The format can be simple: I open with a chalice lighting and meditative words (often in the form of inviting them into a mindfulness practice for a few moments). We have an extended check-in where everyone is encouraged to hold their verbal responses and simply practice deep listening. During the check-in, it is not

unusual to hear people wrestling with the narcissistic behavior they are experiencing in their lives or in the public arena. After everyone has checked in, I share a brief reading and then we engage in a discussion that arises from either the reading or the check-in. At the end of the session, I re-visit a few of the words from the reading and extinguish the chalice. The ritual aspects of these groups are comforting to the participants, and the Grief Group (now in its sixth year) has served as the foundation for several deep friendships in the congregation.

These kinds of groups are not usually available in UU congregations our size; larger congregations might have them but they are far from ubiquitous even in the largest of program-sized churches. Nonetheless, they are important spaces for people to hold these difficult emotions and begin to explore their traumatic experiences; after all, "Getting perspective on your terror and sharing it with others can reestablish the feeling that you are a member of the human race."[61] The truth is that most smaller congregations already have the minimal resources needed to support these kinds of groups; they simply need to understand why they are so beneficial to the overall spiritual well-being of the congregation. Certainly anyone coming to me as a trauma survivor would (if appropriate) be invited to be part of these groups as they have been ideal places for people to deal with their trauma in a place where they can be heard and valued. Likewise, they have been places that have re-connected traumatized individuals to the community. Most importantly, I have heard many participants use the group as a way of reminding themselves what connects them to the good in the world and a sense of meaning or purpose that is larger than themselves. As we well know, this is one of the goals of spiritual healing for narcissistic abuse survivors.

[61] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 412.

Spiritual Practices

Having looked at how the components of worship (preaching, ritual, and prayer) can be used to aid in survivor healing, along with the use of pastoral systems (both individual and group care sessions), we now turn to spiritual practices. How can faith communities understand and teach spiritual care practices as tools for healing from emotional abuse and trauma?

In *The Feminist Ethic of Risk*, a foundational text for understanding contemporary Unitarian Universalism, theologian and social ethicist Sharon D. Welch says, "the terms *holy* and *divine* denote a quality of being within the web of life. . .and they denote the quality of being worthy of honor, love, respect, and affirmation."[62] A survivor beaten down by narcissistic abuse feels very disconnected from honor, love, respect, and affirmation—and thus inevitably feels disconnected from the holy and the divine. Hence, the restoration of this connection to the holy must also come with a restoration of the connection to self-worth, self-respect, self-love, and so on. Spiritual practices in this context serve not just to connect the survivor to God or whatever source sustains them. Instead, spiritual practices in the context of abuse healing also must bolster the empowerment of the individual so that they are then able to once again feel full ownership of their sense of self. One of the spiritual concerns of narcissistic abuse is that in engaging with a narcissist, the narcissist "initiates a process (anything from a gesture to a mood) wherein the other is to respond in kind."[63] Thus, survivors have often spent so much time and energy attempting to match their narcissist's demand for mirroring that they no longer know how to exhibit their own truth in a given moment. Spiritual practices can help return them to a sense of

[62] Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 178.

[63] Craydon D. McDonald, "Clarifying Several Instances of Narcissism and Their Implications for Pastoral Care," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 45, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 153.

ownership of their feelings, senses, and actions, along with re-affirming their position in the larger web of life.

With this as a primary consideration, a trauma-informed congregational setting can also make it a priority to teach about other spiritual resources and approaches that survivors might consider exploring. Scott Alexander says, "A spiritual practice is any regular, intentional activity that serves to significantly deepen the quality and content of your relationship with the miracle of life."[64] A narcissistic abuse survivor often feels disconnected from the miracle of life; they are disconnected from their own self, and thus lack a sense of connection to their own robust living spiritual flame. By taking time to educate, model, and even engage spiritual practices within the congregational setting, pastors and other teachers can help survivors become more equipped with tools for spiritual healing that they can implement on their own, outside of the community setting. While they might need community and ministerial support and encouragement to begin engaging in these practices, the hope is that they will eventually integrate them into their own everyday lives as a source of on-going healing.

With this in mind, I am including six categories of spiritual practices with some description of the methodology that has gone into choosing them. Included with some of these categories are examples (found in the Appendices) of how these spiritual practices might be implemented into church life, whether in the form of inspiration and education through sermons, use as a workshop, and so on. I am well aware that these explanations of spiritual practices are by no means exhaustive; rather, I present them as possibilities (designed to be effective in UU settings) to consider as practices that foster healing from narcissistic abuse. A trauma-informed minister can then adapt these practices—or be inspired to explore new ones—grounded in a

[64] Scott Alexander, *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple pathways for enriching your life* (Boston, MA: Skinner House, 1999), 5.

similar understanding of trauma but tailored to fit the culture of the congregation and be responsive to the immediate needs and circumstances of narcissistic abuse survivors within their community.

Mindfulness & Prayer Practices

As we have already established, mindfulness is a natural fit as part of an effective pastoral care approach for abuse survivors. But there is no need to isolate mindfulness to a pastoral care session alone; in fact, the concept of mindfulness is woven throughout all the practices described in this project. While there are practices that utilize mindfulness in their names (such as mindfulness meditation), the reality is that most contemplative and spiritual practices are based in a mindful orientation. Jon Kabat-Zinn says that mindfulness "is awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally."[65] Zinn discovered that through simple mindfulness techniques, the emotional, psychological, and even physical health of patients improved, inspiring similar mindfulness programs now found in schools, prisons, veterans' centers, and hospitals—and it has equal therapeutic value for abuse survivors. Van der Kolk says that "mindfulness not only makes it possible to survey our internal landscape with compassion and curiosity but can also actively steer us in the right direction for self-care."[66]

Mindfulness is actually an umbrella term that covers a whole host of techniques and practices, but they are all centered around that notion of paying attention. At its most basic, mindfulness meditation is practiced by inviting the survivor to sit with their eyes closed, placing attention on the movement of the breath in and out. If they become distracted from their breathing and start to think about other things (the circumstances of the abuse, etc.) than they are

[65] Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Mindfulness for Beginners* (Boulder: Sounds True, 2012), 13.
[66] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 497.

taught simply return to focusing on the breath. With regular practice, it becomes easier and easier to keep one's attention focused on the breath and away from the loop of abuse-related negative thoughts. For trauma survivors such as those who have experienced narcissistic abuse, this ever-playing loop is characterized by traumatic aspects of their experience: words that hurt deeply, incidents that cut to the core, and other painful reminders. Mindfulness practices offer an opportunity to disconnect from that loop and open space for peaceful and even healing thoughts and feelings.

Mindfulness meditation practices can be fairly easily integrated into the UU parish setting, whether educating and practicing them during worship services, or having dedicated workshops or regularly scheduled small group sessions devoted to this practice. A trauma-informed minister can invite abuse survivors to learn this practice to aid in their continued work of trauma healing. For abuse survivors, "mindful breathing exercises and meditation are especially helpful in managing what therapist Pete Walker calls our fight, flight, freeze or fawn responses to flashbacks and ruminating thoughts. Taking time to observe our breath, whether it be for five minutes or an hour, can be immensely helpful."[67]

The effects of this go beyond faith; neuroimaging techniques indicate that mindfulness actually changes the network structures in our brain.[68] From Harvard University to the University of British Columbia to MIT, the science of mindfulness has been studied and accepted, but it is equally at home in the church. In many ways, science is catching up to what religion has intuitively known for centuries. Mindfulness is at least twenty-five hundred years old, dating

[67] Shahida Arabi, *POWER: Surviving and Thriving After Narcissistic Abuse: A collection of essays on malignant narcissism and recovery from emotional abuse* (Brooklyn: Thought Catalog, 2017), 486.

[68] Andrew E. Budson, "Can Mindfulness Change Your Brain?" Harvard Medical School, May 13, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20220401015828/https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/can-mindfulness-change-your-brain-202105132455.

back to Vipassana, the Buddhist meditation practice that has inspired many contemporary mindfulness techniques because it naturally makes room for theists and non-theists alike. Thus, it is ideal for exploring in the UU parish setting, both for being theologically inclusive but for also having scientifically measurable healthy effects on the brain, while still having an ancient pedigree that makes it wholly appropriate as part of the spiritual landscape of church life.

Closely rooted within mindfulness practices are contemplative and prayer practices. Within the Judeo-Christian tradition we find the overlapping practices of prayer and contemplation, practices that utilize the practice of close awareness as a means to achieve greater spiritual wholeness. It may seem like a superficial distinction, but prayer is one way a narcissistic abuse survivor (searching for their true self) can distinguish themselves from the narcissist. As D. Capp says, "One of the best ways to determine whether a given individual suffers from narcissistic personality disorder is to take seriously the simple truism that some persons act as though they think they are God."[69] By engaging with prayer, the survivor is making the declaration that they are not like the narcissist; unlike the narcissist, they recognize something greater than their own ego. That is not to say that a survivor must pray to God; as long as the survivor is offering up their contemplation to a sense of something larger than their own ego (even if it is "just" the complex scientific realities of the vast universe in which we exist), then prayer can be understood as taking place.

This prayer can take multiple forms. In the Hindu tradition, practices like yogic meditation focus on becoming consciously aware of or investigating into one's own mind and body to know oneself better and more wholly. Erik Walker Wikstrom suggests that "whatever else it might be—a conversation with the Divine, an internal dialog, a practice of calming and

[69] Donald Capps, "God Diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder," *Pastoral Psychology* 58, no. 2 (2009): 193–206.

centering—I think of prayer as a movement into and through Mystery."[70] Indeed, one can think of the survivor as initially existing in a place of mystery (lowercase 'm') marked by uncertainty, confusion, and disconnection from others, from the sacred, and from their own sense of self. The survivor is then attempting, through these contemplative practices, to find their way to Mystery (with a capital 'M') where they do not necessarily have all the answers but nonetheless feel integrated into the Mystery that guides their existence.

There are multiple prayers a survivor might explore to feel more connected. These include Wikstrom's interpretation of a centering prayer which is focused on calming the mind and body.[71] The practice of this kind of prayer honors the reality that "traumatized people feel and act as though their nervous systems have been disconnected from the present."[72] Centering prayer can thus be an opportunity for a survivor to make space to intentionally calm a reactive nervous system; as Wikstrom defines it for himself, a practitioner is invited to sit within the still of the moment and pay attention to their breath and body while practicing releasing incoming thoughts before they take hold. In many cases, a survivor has been working very hard (unconsciously) to disconnect from their body in order to lessen their response to stimuli that evokes the trauma and to keep recurring thoughts at bay. The Centering Prayer offers a safe space to begin bringing the body and mind back into balance.

The Naming Prayer is focused on naming what a person is grateful for, which can be an important practice for a survivor who is struggling to see the positive components in their lives since the abuse tends to eclipse all else. The Knowing Prayer invites the practitioner to find places where they may need reconciliation and atonement. This "confession" style prayer is not

[70] Erik Walker Wikstrom, "Prayer," in *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple pathways for enriching your life*, ed. Scott Alexander (Boston, MA: Skinner House, 1999), 106.
[71] Wikstrom, "Prayer," 107.
[72] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 80.

about fostering shame and guilt, according to Wikstrom; instead, it is "an opportunity to see and know yourself in all your subtle shadings," an "honest self-appraisal."[73] The Listening Prayer invites quiet listening for the divine spark within, while the Loving Prayer invites the survivor to look outward, to gaze upon those in need with a loving heart.[74]

Thus, prayer as described by Wikstrom has all the characteristics of the healing practices necessary for narcissistic abuse recovery. Prayer as described here invites the survivor into a place of calm and peace; the survivor is then able to explore what they are grateful for. They can spend time taking ownership of what they really have to atone for, and let go of the guilt and shame that the narcissistic abuser might have projected onto them—and that they might still be carrying. They can then make space to listen for the sacred, and finally, to begin the important healing work of thinking beyond oneself, beyond one's pain. All of this is in service to the greater call "to 'live deep' in the present, to fully appreciate and commit to life, and to remove all distractions from this engagement with ourselves, and in the world."[75] Through mindfulness practices, whether expressed in meditation, prayer, or other means, a survivor can begin the process of becoming restored to their authentic self, and thus able to fully commit to the rich array of life possibilities available to them.

Reading & Writing

UU historian Susan J. Ritchie says, "with sacred reading, the mindfulness given to the text translates not into product but into a reminder of the power and holistic character of the life within in and Beyond me."[76] So often, we read out of necessity or we read to escape. Most of us

[73] Wikstrom, "Prayer," 107.
[74] Wikstrom, "Prayer," 108.
[75] Pinn, *End of God Talk*, 95.
[76] Susan J. Ritchie, "Sacred Reading," in *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple pathways for enriching your life*, ed. Scott Alexander (Boston, MA: Skinner House, 1999), 99.

have days filled with reading, whether articles on the internet or emails related to our work. Rarely do we have time to mindfully explore and consider what we read.

Sacred reading, the second spiritual practice we will explore, can take multiple forms as a tool for spiritual healing. For the purposes of this illustration, we will work with Lectio Divina. The practice of Lectio Divina associated with Christian monastics may initially seem very far removed from spiritual healing from narcissistic abuse, yet it nonetheless offers possibilities for use as a tool clergy can share with their congregations. While its roots are in Alexandria in the Third Century CE, it can be adapted to contemporary use and understanding. There are four basic steps: lectio, where one slowly reads and re-reads the text, paying attention to the meaning. Once the meaning has been understood from this thoughtful process, the meditatio step invites one to read and re-read a word or phrase that has attracted attention. A survivor would ask themselves: what meaning do these words have in the context of my life?

What is traditionally called "oratio" is the stage where one opens the heart to whatever source is applicable: Nature, the Spirit of Life, God—whatever invokes a sense of something greater than oneself. Once that sense of openness has been found, a survivor might meditate on what the meaning of this text invites them to do in their lives, what it has illuminated for them, or how have they been changed by it, even in some small way. Finally, contemplatio asks one to sit in the silence of the moment. As Susan Ritchie says, "the final act in the practice of sacred reading is the act of meditation on the remembered text. . . The act of meditation was a grappling with, a working of, the text by one's understanding and will."[77] A survivor might or might not be like Christian monastics who felt the presence of God in this moment; a survivor might simply feel a sense of peace and gratitude for having moved through this process of reflection, for how

[77] Ritchie, "Sacred Reading," 103.

they have been moved or changed or even comforted by the experience. Madeleine L'Engle says, "we are hurt; we are lonely; and we turn to. . words, and as compensation beyond all price we are given glimpses of the world on the other side of time and space."[78]

The openness of Unitarian Universalism gives permission for virtually any text to be used in a process of sacred reading: traditional sacred text like the Hebrew or Christian scriptures would work, but as Anthony Pinn says in typically contrarian UU fashion: "these texts and their insights are no more significant and hold no greater meaning than one gathers, for example, from the literary imagination of figures such as Richard Wright and Toni Morrison."[79] Whatever text a survivor might choose to engage with, the point is to allow oneself to become open enough to allow meaning and feeling to enter the experience. In so doing, a survivor practices the art of being connected to their deepest sense of self, that which may have been feeling lost to them, but is now more readily accessible with the text serving as a conduit or mediator between the wounded survivor and their core self. (See Appendix E for a sermon exploring Lectio Divina and serving as an example of how this practice could begin to be explored in the congregational setting.)

Engaging with text as a spiritual practice is not confined solely to reading, however. Van der Kolk speaks of the multiple ways of accessing the "inner world of feelings," saying that "one of the most effective is through writing."[80] Writing need not be steeped in conscious crafting and calculation; instead, so-called "free" writing can simply be a time when our unconscious is allowed to come to the forefront, as popularized as a spiritual practice in Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*. In this book, Cameron describes what she calls "morning pages," which are "three

[78] Madeleine L'Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on faith and art* (New York: Random House, 2016), 64.

[79] Pinn, *End of God Talk,* 9.

[80] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 419.

pages of daily longhand stream of consciousness, written first thing upon arising" and that serve as a "siphoning off of the mind's surface so that we can get to the deeper thoughts and impulses that lie beneath our daily voice-over."[81] Revealed in this kind of writing are our lesser known concerns and preoccupations, and one can allow free writing to become one's "own personal Rorschach test for entering a stream of associations."[82] Madeleine L'Engle talks about the importance of not being judgmental of what is being written (at least during initial spurts of creativity), because when we rush to judge what we write we "close ourselves off from revelation" and fail to notice "that which may expand or even change that which we so zealously think we know."[83] The point of writing as a spiritual practice is not to create great art or even to construct a piece with a particular shape or cohesion. Rather, writing in this context can allow a survivor to become more in touch with what is on both the surface of their mind and what might be hidden below the surface; it can reveal the known and the unknown. While writing as a spiritual practice relies on the practitioner generating words, it is similar to the other spiritual practices explored here in that it does not ask the survivor to articulate the totality of their abuse experiences. Rather, it simply invites them to allow whatever words that are in their hearts and minds to find their way onto the paper.

Certainly, this process can also be harnessed in more structured ways should the survivor be inclined to engage in poetry, fiction, or memoir writing, for instance. While these efforts do ultimately require the practitioner to be a critic of their own work (in order to make choices that shape the piece so it fits within the chosen format), these kinds of writing can nonetheless be therapeutic and even surprising in what they reveal to the writer about their own thoughts or

[81] Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A spiritual path to higher creativity* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 18.
[82] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 420.
[83] L'Engle, *Walking on Water*, 47.

reflections. Writing as a spiritual practice can even help the survivor begin to answer basic questions that can help them find their way back to their core self. Nouwen, for instance, poses the question "what are our wounds?" and then says "words such as 'alienation,' 'separation,' 'isolation' and 'loneliness' have been used as the names of our wounded condition."[84] For the survivor searching for language to describe their traumatic experiences, writing as a spiritual practice can help them begin to consider (much as Nouwen does) the breadth and scope of language available to describe their own wounding.

Mantras & Affirmations

One of the big issues that narcissistic abuse survivors struggle with is "finding words where words were absent before and, as a result, being able to share your deepest pain and deepest feelings with another human being."[85] Trauma of any kind interferes with one's ability to readily translate the experience into words, but the insidious, cumulative, and covert nature of narcissistic abuse is such that it can make articulating one's thoughts, experiences, and feelings even more difficult. This is where our third category of spiritual practices comes in: mantras and affirmations. These practices can serve as a way to begin safely exploring the process of translating this complicated and often overwhelming experience into words. This, in turn, can help the survivor begin to put together how they might begin to talk about these experiences so as to create a connection with other human beings who might be able to provide comfort and support. After all, the survivor who can "articulate the movements of his inner life, who can give names to his varied experiences, need no longer be a victim of himself, but is able slowly and consistently to remove the obstacles that prevent the spirit from entering."[86] Affirmations and

[84] Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 126.
[85] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 414.
[86] Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 68.

mantras can be the first movement toward that articulation, and they can be formulated specifically to the experiences, preferences, and needs of the individual as they move out of the narrative the narcissistic abuser has assigned to them and begin to create new language to understand themselves.

For instance, a survivor "can easily create [their] own mantra to help open more fully into the release of sorrow, anger, or whatever emotions are presenting as part of [their] healing work."[87] The words will be unique to the survivor; they might change over time as spiritual needs evolve and change. Clergy can aid in educating survivors in their parish about this practice; encouraging them to begin with a simple mantra such as "I honor all my feelings" or "May I be filled with loving kindness" that can pave the way for them to begin thinking what words or phrases might be useful to repeat within their own heads. While these mantras may sound relatively simple, they may serve as important counterpoints to the loop of negative statements the narcissistic abuser might have instilled in a survivor's head. ("My feelings don't matter" or "No one loves me," for instance.)

Mantras can be short phrases that allow a survivor to better get in touch with their own feelings and help them return to that sense of self-ownership that is so often missing after the abuse. Affirmations, meanwhile, serve the purpose of reminding a survivor of their worth and value. For example, Arabi Shahida writes, "if you have an insecurity about your appearance that your abuser has attempted to instill in you, a positive affirmation can gently interrupt the pattern of ruminating over such harsh comments by replacing the toxic thought with a loving one." [88]Again, this is a simple technique that clergy can educate their parishioners about, even through

[87] Jennie Knoop, "Loss and Grief," in *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple pathways for enriching your life*, ed. Scott Alexander (Boston, MA: Skinner House, 1999), 184.

[88] Arabi, *POWER*, 485.

worship services that include words of communal affirmation. A simple affirmation repeated daily at certain times—or when certain signs of distress have been activated—can begin to re-write the script within the survivor's head, especially when it's "tailored to [their] particular wounds and insecurities."[89] A simple affirmation such as "I am worthy of love just as I am" or "God wants the best for me" can go a long way in helping to shake off old internal monologues (often seeded by the narcissist) that speak of worthlessness, disconnection from the divine, un-lovability, and so on. Ultimately, "the restoration of a positive view of the self includes not only a renewed sense of autonomy within connection but also renewed self-respect,"[90] which is likely be very much compromised for survivors, especially those just beginning the work of healing.

The practice of engaging in mantras or words of affirmation doesn't just allow the brain to create new neural pathways of positive information for the survivor to draw spiritual nourishment from; it also begins to shape new language and words for the survivor around their experience and their sense of self. As van der Kolk says, "This is one of the most profound experiences we can have, and such resonance, in which hitherto unspoken words can be discovered, uttered, and received, is fundamental to healing the isolation of trauma—especially if other people in our lives have ignored or silenced us. Communicating fully is the opposite of being traumatized."[91] By no means will a regular practice of mantra chanting or saying words of affirmation provide a survivor with all the language ultimately needed to fully reflect upon and describe narcissistic trauma. Nonetheless, over time this practice can begin to re-write and expand the script within a survivor's head, unlocking further language—affirming of the

[89] Arabi, *POWER*, 485.
[90] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 142.
[91] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 414.

survivor's sense of self—that will allow them to begin sharing on a deeper level with others the realities of their traumatic experiences and journey toward recovery.

Expressive Arts

As has been established, "trauma radically changes people: that in fact they no longer are 'themselves.' It is excruciatingly difficult to put that feeling of no longer being yourself into words."[92] Much of what has been explored here represents options for the survivor to freely connect with the ineffable; this, in turn, allows them to begin making sense of their experience in a space that does not necessarily require them to be able to fully explicate the complexity of their experience. Thus, the expressive arts—which includes visual arts, drama, music, and so on--also represent other means by which survivors might begin the work of healing without the pressure of full articulation of their pain and struggle; this category is the fourth spiritual practice we will explore as a tool for healing from narcissistic abuse. Certainly, the expressive arts have a long history of being part of the congregational experience; in order to utilize these already existing mediums as tools for survivor healing, clergy can consider how they might be used to engender opportunities for healing. Moreover, "the capacity of art, music, and dance to circumvent the speechlessness that comes with terror may be one reason they are used as trauma treatments in cultures around the world."[93] The church is already well positioned to partake in this already existing widespread treatment and is uniquely equipped to do so, being a place that lifts music into a place of sacred appreciation and often (through images, architecture, and so on) utilizes art in a similar manner to invite in the holy.

But how exactly do the arts succeed in re-connecting the narcissistic abuse survivor to their sense of self? One way to look at it: "trauma can disconnect us from both our minds and

[92] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 418.
[93] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 427.

bodies through processes of depersonalization, de-realization, and even amnesia; art can help us reintegrate the trauma where we were previously disconnected from the experience."[94] Expressive arts—like painting, sketching, playing or listening to music, sculpting, quilting and needlework, performing in plays, and so on—all can be engaged in as spiritual practices that lead toward self-ownership for survivors. In UU congregations throughout the country, there are often opportunities for participants to be part of a congregational choir, or participate in worship as soloists or in congregational singing. Some congregations periodically have all-music services which are designed to invite in the holy in a different way than worship that is word-centered does. There are congregations with active dramatics groups that put on plays periodically and participate in worship through performing short pieces of drama. Some congregations have quilting groups, watercolor classes, nature-study sketch groups, and so on. These activities are often perceived primarily as social outlets and less as ministries that lead people closer to their sense of the sacred, though there is usually some acknowledgement of this. Clearly, the expressive arts already have a natural home in much of congregational life, but how often is clergy aware of how powerful these practices can be for abuse survivors to do the work of healing and restoring their sense of self? UU writer Julie-Ann Silberman says that art as a spiritual practice is nourishing to her because it takes her away from words and her conscious thoughts; instead, she says, "I need a spiritual practice that will take me away from those things and get me in touch with what is happening at the core of my being."[95]

For the narcissistic abuse survivor, the core of their being may seem deeply submerged under layers of confusion, shame, regret, and fear and it feels like their "spirit has

[94] Arabi, *POWER*, 443.

[95] Julie-Ann Silberman, "Art," in *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple pathways for enriching your life*, ed. Scott Alexander (Boston, MA: Skinner House, 1999), 255.

completely gone away."[96] Engagement with art as a spiritual practice can be a way to not only restore the survivor to a positive sense of self-worth, but also to begin connecting with the realities of the abuse in new and potentially generative, informative, and healing ways. The expressive arts can provide "a medium through which we can begin a dialogue with our trauma by reconnecting us to the somatic and limbic aspects of the brain where trauma is encoded."[97] Silberman confirms this aspect of art as self-restorative spiritual practice when she says that it "has allowed me to reconnect with parts of myself that I had long negated and devalued. Having integrated artwork back into my life, I feel a sense of wholeness that I had lost."[98] Certainly this testimony suggests that the expressive arts can be a powerful spiritual tool for a survivor to explore.

But what exactly should these practices look like? Like so many of the alternatives explored here, the practice selected will have much to do with the survivor's interests, needs, and even social location. The congregational milieu can begin to model the value of this kind of practice by positioning their already existing expressive arts programs not just as "hobbies," social gatherings, or performance opportunities—but as actual spiritual practices designed to help the individual become more connected to whatever source sustains them, along with deepening their connection to their own core self—their soul, if you will. This can provide permission for a survivor to begin utilizing the expressive arts as a spiritual practice that informs their healing process; for instance, a long-time knitter can now see their knitting not just as something trivial that passes the time, but as an opportunity to connect with the creative part of themselves, a part that resides within their core self. By valuing artistic endeavors as a reflection

[96] Mackenzie, *Psychopath Free*, 164.
[97] Arabi, *POWER*, 366.
[98] Silberman, "Art", 258.

of one's core self, a survivor can begin to uncover who they truly are. They need no longer to cling to the false image the narcissist has created of them; instead, they can see themselves as a beautiful human being who makes beautiful pieces of art. Or perhaps the art reveals the complexity of what they are feeling at their core: the moody blues and grays of the ocean they painted might give them a window into the poignant emotions of their current state. Likewise, there might be beauty that is made visible even within that moodiness.

Madeleine L'Engle says that all children are artists, and it is only with time and the corruption of the world that they lose touch with that. She says, "a lot of my adult life has been spent in trying to overcome this corruption, in unlearning the dirty devices of the world, which would dull our imaginations, cut away our creativity."[99] So too does narcissistic abuse limit the scope of a person's imagination and generative sense of possibility. This is understandable since being in an abusive situation naturally robs a person of their sense of expression; many narcissistic abuse survivors are primarily concerned with survival—making it through any given day without becoming entangled in the narcissist's web of abuse or encountering anything that might resemble that web and thus bring their trauma to the forefront. This disconnect from the possibilities of the imagination is particularly destructive when it is taken into account that "traumatic events are almost impossible to put into words."[100] Without words to express the complexity of this experience, the expressive arts are a natural alternative—but a narcissistic abuse survivor may also be disconnected from the power of their imaginations, from an appreciation of their own creative gifts. Therefore, it can be the work of the church to remind its parishioners that their creativity is sacred; that tapping into that creativity through the expressive

[99] L'Engle, *Walking on Water*, 52.
[100] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 489.

arts is mentally and spiritually healthy; and that it can even have direct effects on recovery from the brokenness that comes from experiences of abuse.

Appendix F contains some materials and ideas to be used in worship services dedicated to art as a healing spiritual practice.

Body & Movement

Body and movement practices comprise our fifth spiritual practice category.

When narcissistic abuse occurs, "awareness and intentionality are often neglected. . .bodily sensations ignored. Anyone serious about healing enters into a journey in which habitual patterns of disconnection and disregard are addressed, and new pathways forged."[101] Forging those 'new pathways' is done in no small part by no longer ignoring the needs and responses of the body; the survivor must learn to forge an intentional pathway toward restoring their connection to their body. Part of what a narcissistic abuser seeks (however unaware of their own motives they might be) is for the victim to no longer feel their body has a rightful place or positioning in the world. Theologian Anthony Pinn speaks of the displacement of the body's rightful place in the world when he speaks of Frederick Douglass claiming his authority after slavery: "In demanding and holding his place, Douglass was able to damage the cultural construction of his body as despised and was also able to point out the strength and merit of his materiality."[102] Narcissistic abuse enslaves in this way in that it, too, encourages the perception of the survivor's body as despised, its real needs and even its very presence unwelcome in the world. A survivor may exit a relationship with a narcissist feeling that their physical being has little value. Not only is the survivor not connected to their sense of self and identity, but they are also disconnected from the very vessel their essential self is housed in: their own body.

[101] DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church,* 14.
[102] Pinn, *End of God Talk*, 103.

Part of this stems from the perspective of their abuser seeing the survivor as lacking value and worth, which the survivor can then internalize, adding to their sense of both spiritual and physical annihilation. Moreover, part of it this disconnection is the result of a process of self-protection in which the physical realities of "survivors come to revolve around bracing against and neutralizing unwanted sensory experiences, and most people I see in my practice [says van der Kolk] have become experts in such self-numbing."[103] Self-numbing may take multiple forms: a trauma survivor may develop eating disorders, engage in substance abuse, seek out high-risk sensations, or simply fall into lethargy. These physical manifestations are evidence that "traumatic symptoms have a tendency to become disconnected from their source and to take on a life of their own."[104]

This illustrates how "trauma lives in our bodies as well as our minds" which underscores the idea that "it's important that we find at least one form of physical outlet for the intense emotions of grief, rage, and hurt we're bound to feel in the aftermath of abuse and trauma, in order to combat the paralysis that accompanies trauma, leaving us feeling numb and frozen."[105] Thus, physical outlets can serve not just as exercise but as actual spiritual practices, allowing a re-integration of the mind and body so that the survivor can be restored to their sense of self and to a feeling of being whole.

There are already traditional physical outlets that have spirituality mixed into them, many of them popular with Unitarian Universalists and sometimes even available as offerings in the parish setting, such as yoga. Yoga was developed in India and involves slow, careful movements combined with mindful breathing, all of which can help one re-connect with a

[103] Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score,* 467.
[104] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 79.
[105] Arabi, *POWER,* 486.

numbed or neglected body. Tai chi is an ancient Chinese practice involving slow, flowing movements that help to relieve stress, inviting in for the abuse survivor a sense of the body not as a prison but a calming place. Labyrinth walking is an ancient spiritual practice that spans multiple traditions and utilizes meditative walking while engaging in chanting, contemplation, and/or prayer. Many Unitarian Universalists congregations have some form of labyrinth either on their church campus or available to them at their local campsite. The practice of leading a group labyrinth walk in the congregational setting can be a way of modeling for a survivor both the value and some of the techniques of engaging in movement-oriented outlets as spiritual practices.

But movement oriented spiritual practices are by no means limited to the traditional, especially when it comes to trauma seekers finding what is useful for their own empowerment and healing. Shahida Arabi recommends, "Do something that you're passionate about and love to do. Don't force your body into activities that you're not comfortable with or exhaust yourself. Using physical exercise as an outlet should be an act of self-care, not self-destruction."[106] Echoing a similar philosophy, UU Ministries and Faith Development Co-Director Rev. Sarah K. Lammert suggests that sometimes the choice might seem unlikely as a spiritual practice, but it may have significant value as such nonetheless. In her case, martial arts became her best option; Lammert says that compared to quiet physical practices she "much prefer[s] kicking, screaming, and punching as a spiritual path!"[107] Lammert goes on to say that after the experience of trauma stemming from abuse, she had lost the ability to "feel" her body, but the act of engaging in martial arts allowed her "to heal in a deep, cellular way. . learning the basics of being a human in a body again."[108] A trauma-informed ministry can help survivors open up possibilities for

[106] Arabi, *POWER*, 486.
[107] Sarah Lammert, "Martial Arts," in *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple pathways for enriching your life*, ed. Scott Alexander (Boston, MA: Skinner House, 1999), 119.
[108] Lammert, "Martial Arts", 120-121.

movement as a spiritual practice; I have seen profound spiritual changes from members of our congregation's Grief Group who participate in a water aerobics class, including one person saying the class reminded her body that "it was alive and therefore *I* am alive." Dancing, walking, running, and virtually any other exercise can be translated into a spiritual practice for a survivor if done mindfully and with a focus on re-claiming ownership of one's body.

Another thing clergy can do is encourage narcissistic abuse survivors to consider and reflect upon their intentions in pursuing something physical as a spiritual practice—and then write down those intentions. For instance, in Appendix G, you can view my intention statement as I began a period dedicated to a walking meditation. Not everyone will be able to fully articulate how their choice of spiritual practices reflects a response to the trauma they have experienced; for some, the choice will simply be intuitive, based on what they are drawn to doing or what they think they are physically capable of. Nonetheless, for those who can, an intention statement, even a relatively superficial one, can be a way of beginning to connect their response to trauma to the physical outlet they have chosen.

Gratitude & Compassion Practices

Finally, gratitude and compassion practices serve as our concluding spiritual practice category.

Sharon D. Welch says, "Attentiveness to the web of life, to the exuberance of children, to the beauty of nature, provides a sense of peace, of belonging, of exultation and ecstasy. Attentiveness to these forces provides energy, forces, and a challenging reorientation of our lives."[109] In this context, Welch is connecting this orientation of gratitude with the social responsibility that naturally results from truly respecting all of creation. Welch's conception of

[109] Welch, *Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 179.

justice work gestures primarily toward the macro systems at play: the dynamics that feed and fuel war, for instance. Certainly, however, we can regard her perspective as relevant to situations of individual abuse, especially in recognition of the knowledge that abuse is inextricably tied to larger social machinations of power and privilege. What is ultimately of greatest value here in respect to this project is Welch's contention that attentiveness (gratitude) toward the realities of everyday life invites us to reorient our lives. For the abuse survivor who has been understandably caught in a focus dedicated to the abusive situation and abuser, this reorientation is not merely a preference but a necessity for the survival of the self.

Like mindfulness practices, the practice of gratitude—while having roots in the world's great religions--has been popularized in the media in recent years.[110] It is a given these days that positioning ourselves with gratitude toward what we encounter that lifts us up contributes to our mental and physical well-being. This "reorientation of our lives" that Welch champions really does change us on a fundamental level, whoever we may be. For the narcissistic abuse survivor, it might have become very easy to lose sight of the good that exists in the world.[111] We know that "depression is an extremely common associated feature of the Narcissistic Personality Disorder," meaning that survivors have also been close by and attempting to meet the needs of someone looking through the lens of depression.[112] Engaging in gratitude practices can begin to help the survivor to move further away from what was once the all-consuming perspective of the narcissist.

Moreover, the practice of being grateful can open the door not just to feeling more joy but also wrestling with more challenging emotions, such as compassion and forgiveness. As

[110] Saoirse McClory, "Brene Brown and Oprah on Joy and Gratitude," Gratefulness, Mar. 17, 2013, https://web.archive.org/web/20220401020729/https://gratefulness.org/resource/brene-brown-on-joy-and-gratitude/.
[111] MacKenzie, *Psychopath Free*, 323.
[112] McDonald, "Clarifying Several Instances of Narcissism," 155.

Henri Nouwen says, "The compassionate man who points to the possibility of forgiveness helps others to free themselves from the chains of their restrictive shame, allows them to experience their own guilt, and restores their hope for a future."[113] Again, when considering guilt in the case of a narcissistic abuse survivor, the emphasis is on inviting that survivor to claim responsibility where it is appropriate, and throw off the weight of guilt or shame that might have been laid upon them by the abuser. Practicing gratitude can also serve as a doorway to inviting in more complicated reflections of forgiveness and responsibility, while still holding the abuser absolutely accountable for what they have done. Gratitude practices can be part of the road back to a survivor being in touch with the full complexity of their emotions. For many survivors who have spent months, years, or even decades living in a place of fear, the practice of inviting in gratitude can be a radical and revolutionary one, inviting the brain to begin processing in a different way than it has while existing primarily in trauma mode. The psychology and science behind gratitude, especially its effects on the brain, can be found in many books on the market, such as Jeremy Adam Smith's *The Gratitude Project: How the Science of Thankfulness Can Rewire Our Brains for Resilience, Optimism, and the Greater Good*.[114]

Now that the connection gratitude plays in survivor healing has been established, it seems unnecessary to delve too deeply into the multitude of gratitude practices that have been popularized in current popular culture. Gratitude journals, gratitude meditations, verbalizing gratitude to others, and so on, have all been covered exhaustively by contemporary media. Like mindfulness, the media has caught on to something that has a foundation in real science and run with it, almost to the point of undercutting its power simply by its ubiquity. Nonetheless,

[113] Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*, 73.

[114] Jeremy Adam Smith, *The Gratitude Project: How the Science of Thankfulness Can Rewire Our Brains for Resilience, Optimism, and the Greater Good* (Oakland: New Harbinger, 2020), 21-34.

gratitude practices, however one chooses to engage in them, have real benefits, and are a safe and accessible starting point for an abuse survivor looking to change their orientation to everyday input. What trauma may encourage one to receive with fear, gratitude can encourage one to approach with a different mindset. A trauma-informed congregational setting can effectively incorporate gratitude practices into its preaching and teaching.

Like gratitude practices, there are also practices that are less well-known that center more complicated emotional positions like empathy and compassion. For instance, as explored in Frank Rogers, Jr. book *The Compassion Practice*, Rogers says a person's compassionate, connected self is their truest self.[115] Cultivating compassion is about remembering who a survivor really is: removing the trauma-related obstacles in the way to uncover their truest essence. A triggered trauma survivor might be alienated from their true self, or what Rogers calls 'interior movements': overwhelming emotions, internal monologues that tell them they're not good enough, habitual behaviors that aren't good for them, negative narratives real and imagined that replay through their heads, and all the bodily sensations that go with this—tension headaches, upset stomachs, stiff necks, etc.[116] When a survivor is in this state they often respond in one of two ways: they either act out, which means they submit to these feelings, or they resist, where they try to ignore this interior movement.

Both acting our and resistance are counter-productive. Neither one addresses that these activated interior movements are rooted in internal suffering, what Rogers sees as distorted cries frantically waving to get the survivor's attention: fears they're still holding onto, deep longings that have remained unfulfilled, aching wounds still unhealed, and gifts that have been stifled.

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[115] Frank Rogers Jr., *Practicing Compassion* (Nashville, TN: Fresh Air Books, 2015), 9-16.
[116] Rogers, *Practicing Compassion,* 38-40.

These interior movements are not "bad" things; they are actually flags intended to secure survival, healing, or flourishing.

The practice was then designed to help the practitioner reconnect with compassion felt for themselves and others. Rogers details the process of restoring compassion utilizing the acronym P.U.L.S.E—which consists of paying attention, understanding the suffering, loving with empathetic connection, sensing the sacred, and embodying new life. (See Appendix H for an example of how UU clergy might incorporate teaching about the Compassion Practice into a worship service.) The P.U.L.S.E. practice is designed to honor the responses of its practitioners, and an abuse survivor can be assured that it fully recognizes the spectrum of feelings and physical reactions they might hold.[117] The process invites a survivor engaging in it to hold compassion for themselves and their experiences, and even to turn that compassion toward the larger world.

A compassion practice like this one can not only help survivors to begin to have more compassion for themselves and others, but also better understand the places that trigger their own reactivity. It is also a practice that is thoroughly compatible with Unitarian Universalism which, because of its theological openness, is necessarily grounded in a Religious Humanism that serves as common ground, one in which "time and space are ritualized through the remembering of connection, of relationship to self, others, 'world;' this remembrance can take place anywhere, under numerous circumstances, alone or in the company of others."[118] Gratitude and compassion practices have this quality of being available in any given circumstance, reminding us (especially through engaging in them repeatedly as intentional endeavors) of our own sense of self and its relationship to others and the larger world or universe, however we understand it. These practices

[117] Rogers, *Practicing Compassion*, 27.
[118] Pinn, *End of God Talk*, 124.

open up spaces within a survivor that have been narrowed by the experiences of abuse, beginning to ignite neural pathways that have long been dormant or have perhaps never been lit.

Chapter 5: On Becoming Communities Responsive to Narcissistic Abuse Survivors

The Obstacles Ahead

As alternately cautious but optimistic as I have been in researching and creating this project, I recognize that there is still a long way to go before UU churches are truly operating from a place of being trauma-informed in general, much less informed about narcissistic abuse. The road to being responsive to narcissistic abuse survivors in the parish setting still stretches some distance ahead with a few unexpected turns likely just outside of view. However, there is greater urgency than ever as we consider the amount of unhealthy behavior that is on display in the public sphere; from hateful discourse to violence on the streets, we live in volatile times with much spiritual healing needed.

Make no mistake, this is hard work. Educating oneself and others on a difficult topic like narcissistic abuse is likely to bring forward equally difficult emotional responses, in both caregivers (clergy) and survivors. To bring frank and honest attention to this subject in parish settings is to also invite people to begin tearing down their emotional walls—and this has consequences that can sometimes be fraught with challenges. As those emotions rise to the surface, it is not unusual for triggered congregants to project negative assessments onto clergy and other congregational leaders. People might act out within the system, become obstructionists for further movement forward as a community, or even engage in public scenes of anger or other heated emotions. These and other kinds of responses can be expected when a congregation is collectively becoming educated on a challenging, emotionally complicated issue.

Clergy introducing this topic should plan in advance how they might compassionately respond to these and other possible responses. Pre-planning might include inviting Board members to be ready to share and reflect upon any out-of-the-ordinary behaviors they might

experience, making sure any lay-led pastoral care teams are emotionally prepared for what may come, and making sure any clergy involved has time and space to practice proper self-care. This important work should not be cast aside for fear of these responses, however; after all, we know that the "the guiding principle of recovery is to restore power and control to the survivor."[119] Sometimes the process of restoring self-ownership is messy; it may result in magnified expressions of emotions and behaviors. Despite the concern we might feel in response to witnessing these displays of feeling, they might actually be indicative of important healing work that is effectively—if awkwardly--beginning.

Next Steps for Research and Implementation

Many Unitarian Universalists have a strong commitment to social justice, and certainly, that commitment to justice has been emphasized in this faith tradition from its beginnings in the United States. For a good portion of those UUs, their sense of well-being and wholeness is directly tied to their active engagement with social concerns. For them, engagement in social justice serves as a spiritual practice, whether they consciously understand it that way or not.

This project does not address this directly as a spiritual practice option because it opens up another separate field of research: How does engagement in a larger (sometimes hostile) community affect a trauma survivor? What are the benefits and challenges of healing from abuse utilizing a spiritual practice the requires engagement with the complexities of the public sphere? How is healing affected by a spiritual practice that relies on multiple relationships of varying degrees of closeness? How is an abuse survivor affected by the peaks and valleys of social justice work, not to mention the overwhelming need that is associated with it?

These are all worthy reflections and would serve to augment the work I present here.

[119] Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 324.

Likewise, I have not utilized energy within these pages to explore how a narcissistic abuser might hold themselves accountable or work through their own spiritual recovery from the disorder. While this is a worthy field of study, my primary concern has been survivors of this form of abuse since they are both greater in number and more likely to seek help. Informed clergy should be aware, however, that narcissists are already at home in their congregation's pews. A narcissistic-informed ministry will consider how to hold that complicated reality while doing the work of providing healing for survivors.

Concluding Reflections

At this particular historical moment, there are many concerns about the relevance of the congregational setting for peoples' lives. During the pandemic, many people drifted away from the parish setting; yet, some remain connected through internet offerings and are still very engaged. Likewise, others have found their way to congregations thanks to the proliferation of churches now having an online presence. On the other hand, a greater number of people seem to be moving away from the parish experience. One general observation I could make is that in light of the great trauma experienced by most in 2020 and 2021, the relevance of congregational life might seem less vital to the realities of today's world in some peoples' eyes. For people who have experienced isolation, manipulation by narcissistic politicians, concerns about their health, concerns about white supremacists and the safety of the U.S. democracy, perhaps the parish setting can seem to offer little direct aid to their worries. Add in the individual personal challenges that any congregant faces, including the possibility of narcissistic abuse in either their present or past, and the practices of worship and congregational life may feel a bit out of step with their more immediate needs.

This is one of the reasons that it is so important at this time for churches to consider what role they can play in helping people to heal from the great traumas they have experienced. Not only does this work align with the theologies that inform Unitarian Universalism, but it also aligns with so many of core principles of the world's great religions, whether it be Christianity's call to love one's neighbor as oneself, or Buddhism's acceptance and love of all people. It is the work of religion to meet people where they are at and offer them practices and frameworks to help them gain healing and wholeness. As many tools as there are in the secular world, the spiritual aspect of this work is most uniquely suited to the setting of a faith community, where individual healing is supported both by community members and trained clergy. We cannot expect that the church can provide all the tools a survivor might need, but we can nonetheless appreciate the areas in which progress can be made. As Arabi discusses, the goal is to encourage thriving, and "Thriving isn't about perfection, it's about progress—no matter how small, because it all culminates into growth down the line."[120]

It will be important, though, for congregations and clergy to be deeply reflective on their leadership's own personalities and systems in considering how they can offer healing for narcissistic abuse survivors. In other words, a survivor cannot heal in a crucible of narcissism itself; if the church's minister, system, staff work conditions, communications, etc. are plagued with narcissistic tendencies than it is unlikely to be a potentially healing place for survivors. We know that contemporary research shows that narcissism is more prevalent in clergy than the general population; one study says that clergy show "much higher levels of the most destructive expressions of narcissism than in the general population; while this was anticipated, the actual

[120] Arabi, *POWER*, 216.

levels were greater than expected."[121] If this is so, the question becomes: what can be done to heal the congregations that have been damaged by narcissistic ministers? How can systems based in manipulation, shame, guilt, and non-transparency be re-created as reflections of divine love? How can staff members and lay leaders who were caught within the narcissist's net find healing? All of these things will have to happen in congregations that have experienced narcissistic abuse before they can even begin to consider becoming healing places for other survivors.

Nonetheless, there are many healthy congregations out there who could begin doing this work once they are educated about it and embrace it as part of their mission. With the urgency of this work as a primary consideration, the congregational setting no longer needs to be viewed as a place trapped in the past, but rather, it has the potential to be a place keenly sought by so many who are in need of this particular form of healing that addresses their wounds from narcissistic abuse. Even a casual reader of this project will note that I have not introduced in these pages anything wholly brand new to the parish setting; instead, I have simply acknowledged the multiple resources already at the disposal of many congregations and made suggestions on how they could be modified to encompass the needs of these survivors. While my suggestions are not earth shattering, they nonetheless do offer opportunities for profound growth, change, and healing.

Even by simply beginning to name the kind of abuse so many have suffered either individually or societally, clergy can begin to shift their parishes toward a vitality that is informed by the deep spiritual needs of the moment. In so doing, there is the potential to bring people back to the fold and to the church's larger mission of actively loving and caring for

[121] R. Glenn Ball and Darrell Puls, *Frequency of Narcissistic Personality Disorder in Pastors: A Preliminary Study* (Nashville: American Association of Christian Counselors, 2015), 5.

others. Becoming spaces that honestly name and acknowledge what people have been through allows that mission to play out in the healing of one individual who may then go on to have the strength and empowerment to play a role in the healing of others. We have to break the cycle of abuse here and now; we have to cultivate healthy behaviors and self-understanding in congregants so that this healthiness can be reflected in our church systems, which are only as healthy as those who participate in them.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Sample Sermon on Narcissistic Abuse

Several years ago, when I was just nineteen years old, I was kind of adopted into a Greek American family. My best friend at the time's family welcomed me into their home, stuffing me full of Greek food from the restaurant they owned, inviting me along on Greek Easter picnics, and family gatherings full of spanakopita and baklava. Yesterday, at the big Greek orthodox church in Irvine, I attended the funeral of this good friend's mother, Linda, the one who made all that spanakopita and baklava. I looked at my friend as all those years of memories came rushing back and inadequately said, "time flies." "Yes, it does," she said, and what remained unspoken between us is that with time comes change.

As I sat through that funeral service yesterday, overwhelmed by incense and listening to the chanting echoing through that cavernous room with the gilded iconography that adorns its walls, I marveled at how the Greek orthodox church does mystery. They do it well. We didn't get much in the way of practical advice or too much that was very personal to Linda, our dearly departed, but by God, we got lots of mystery and reverence yesterday.

This has been true of most religion from the beginning. It's been about mystery—the big questions we can't fully answer, like what happens when we die. But time marches on, and with it comes change, and one thing I like about Unitarian Universalism is that we acknowledge the change that comes in our greater knowledge and understanding of what once was simply mystery.

And one great mystery has been about the human heart. Perhaps more even than the mysteries of God, humanity has wondered about one another from the beginning. Why did he or she do what they did? What motivates some to do good and some to do evil?

Mercifully, we now have science now to explain some of our behaviors, and we recognize that there are patterns of behavior that fall into particular personality disorders. And so, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, NPD, which may not seem at first like a religious topic, can be seen indeed as such, for it is another way that we can understand the human heart.

Our Reading today suggests that we have leadership in this country who may have NPD. But what is NPD anyway? You may think it sounds fairly harmless in some ways—named after Narcisuss, someone in love with himself. Well, we all can exhibit those characteristics in some ways, and it's actually hard to advance in this culture without a little narcissism happening.

But the NPD we're talking about is an extreme version of this. The Mayo Clinic says those suffering from NPD have an exaggerated sense of self-importance and a sense of entitlement. They require constant, excessive admiration. They expect to be recognized as superior even without achievements that warrant it, and they exaggerate their achievements and talents. They monopolize conversations and belittle or look down on people they perceive as inferior, and they expect special favors and unquestioning compliance with their expectations. They take advantage of others to get what they want, and have an inability or unwillingness to recognize the needs and feelings of others. Even as they envy others, they boast about themselves. They become impatient or angry when they don't receive special treatment and have significant interpersonal problems and easily feel slighted, reacting with rage toward the other person. They have difficulty regulating emotions and behavior and experience major problems dealing with stress and adapting to change. They feel depressed and moody because they fall short of perfection and have secret feelings of insecurity, shame, vulnerability and humiliation.

A few years ago, I was in a work situation that, despite tapping into every skill I had developed in my life for understanding and dealing with people, was ultimately untenable.

I found myself on the internet, searching, searching to find an explanation for what I was experiencing. The person I was dealing with was unlike I had ever known before—and then I found that list of characteristics and everything snapped into place.

One of the most disturbing things about being in a system, whether it's a family system or a work system, with a leader who is NPD is that those around that person try to normalize the situation. In an effort to please that person and keep the rage from being directed at anyone in the system, you do what you have to do to appease that person. And it becomes normal. Some grow up in households with an NPD parent, spending their life walking on eggshells and trying to please what can never be fully pleased—and it can be a long journey to discover that this is not "normal." Those who have NPD are also excellent at wooing people, using their charisma and attention to lure you in, so you are doubly confused when the manipulation, gaslighting, and various forms of emotional abuse and controlling behavior are underway.

Ultimately, in my own work situation, I discovered that there were others in that system and outside of it who assessed it the way I did. But I didn't know at the time because we were all busy doing our best to make it look like nothing was going on, that it was business as usual.

What we are experiencing with our country's leadership does not look to me to be "business as usual." And so, this morning in our religious community, we are taking the time to unpack something that is no longer just a mystery of the human heart that might have once been tackled by private prayers or laments to God. This we now know understand as a real condition that affects individuals and perhaps even our entire country.

Individually, you might have had a parent, or sibling, or spouse or significant other with NPD. You might be sitting here knowing how hard it was to get away from that situation, that

you ultimately had to cut all the ties you could, engage as little as possible, and do what you could to protect yourself, knowing that your reputation would likely be trashed by this person.

None of this is nice to talk about. But I've heard from many of you stories of people in your own histories who also seem to exhibit characteristics of this personality disorder. And it is likely we have leadership in this country who is also affected by this. So we are all affected, and as a responsible faith community, we need to begin to consider how do we respond. How can we offer healing to survivors of narcissistic abuse?

I am drawn this week to the work of Henri Nouwen. While overtly Christian in his theology, Nouwen also speaks to Unitarian Universalists in general with his very human centered approach. In his book The Wounded Healer, Nouwen writes, "Nobody escapes being wounded. We are all wounded people, whether physically, emotionally, mentally, or spiritually. The main question is not, 'How can we hide our wounds?' so we don't have to be embarrassed, but 'How can we put our woundedness in the service of others?' When our wounds cease to be a source of shame, and become a source of healing, we have become wounded healers."

We are dealing with leadership—and I don't just blame one man, by the way—there's a whole broken, abuse, American system that could be described as narcissistic that puts such people in place. This is older than the youth culture of selfies; in fact, some of this kind of behavior, especially its male-centered focus on being "right" has historically been celebrated in our culture. In this sense, we all sit here a bit traumatized. But the question is how do we actually use this woundedness to serve others?

One of the things I love about Unitarian Universalists is that we have historically always tried something more. We've never just sat in the moment and said, "Gee, slavery is bad; let's not do anything about it." We had whole groups of people who worked to dismantle slavery.

But what we didn't do enough of then is to figure out how to welcome in people who had been slaves, people who had been deeply wounded by an oppressive system, and offer them a faith home. And, if you look at our history, fighting for justice when it came to women's rights, LGBTQ rights, racial justice, we were always there, actively fighting for positive change. But we didn't exactly flood our congregations with gay people or people of color or even women during those periods. And part of this is, I believe, because we didn't always make the connection between these groups' woundedness and our own. We weren't able to see ourselves in their pain and experience. We fought against slavery, for instance, but we didn't sit long enough with the question of what's wrong with the soul of a nation that would do that? We have often been so busy fighting to make things better, and understandably so, that we maybe didn't always pay attention to discerning what was fundamentally wrong at the core. And now, looking the other way from what has been corrupting the nation's heart, has caught up with us on a national scale.

And this problem facing our country is not one that only some people are affected by. It's deep and wherever people fall on the political spectrum, I think they are victims of a deep personality disorder dividing this nation.

When we as a faith community recognize how painful these last few years have been for all of us, then perhaps we can offer something in the way of healing. Nouwen says, "The more I think about the human suffering in our world and my desire to offer a healing response, the more I realize how crucial it is not to allow myself to become paralyzed by feelings of helplessness and guilt. More important than ever is to be very faithful to my vocation to do well the few things I am called to do and hold on to the joy and peace they bring me. I must resist the temptation to let the forces of darkness pull me into despair and make me one more of their many victims."

Living with someone with NPD, whether in your actual house, or at your job, or as a leader in your country, is wounding. It requires you to cope as best you can. For some, it's all about acting like it's normal. For others, it's about strongly reacting against. But I think the healthiest response is to recognize what you're dealing with, and disengage from the unhealthy system or individual as much as possible. And then begin your own process of healing. And when you are able to do that, then you can help others to heal.

Nouwen explains this as, "Compassion- which means, literally, 'to suffer with'- is the way to the truth that we are most ourselves, not when we differ from others, but when we are the same. Indeed, the main spiritual question is not, 'What difference do you make?' but 'What do you have in common?' It is not 'excelling' but 'serving' that makes us most human. It is not proving ourselves to be better than others but confessing to be just like others that is the way to healing and reconciliation."

I love that quotation because I think it speaks to both a response against the narcissism we see at play in this country—not just in the White House but across all our screens—and instead gets at the heart of what connects us as humans. And shows that our value is in our service to one another, not in how exceptional we might think of ourselves.

I doubt if Linda, whose memorial service I attended yesterday, would have thought of herself as exceptional. She was too practical for that with the pragmatism that came from owning a restaurant for decades. But it was in her service to others that she excelled, whether she knew it or not. I remember at my ordination asking if we could hire her to make baklava. The next thing I knew trays and trays of the best homemade baklava you can imagine arrived, no charge. She sewed traditional Greek costumes for dolls and did presentations for the kids at local schools. She coached the kids' soccer team despite the daily demands of running the restaurant. And

when I brought my family to that restaurant, God forbid we tried to pay the bill. It was a life of service in so many ways. And it was an admirable one.

So, in the knowledge that we too have our healing to do, let us serve those people searching to recover from the abuse perpetuated by those who are most broken in our world, who have lost their way from an understanding of our common vulnerabilities as humans. Let us be sensitive and kind, but strong. Let us invite in change. Let us be brave. And most of all, let us be fully and gloriously—and imperfectly--human.

Appendix B: Sample Worship Ritual

The Sea: A Worship Ritual for Healing Narcissistic Abuse

MINISTER: I am going to now ask to hear from our sea of voices, each of who will share with us a story that could be the story of many people who walk through the doors of our church. Let us hear the voices of the wounded, calling from amidst the waves of experience.

ALL: The tide turns and life ebbs and flows.

VOICE #1: Since I was little, I have always sought the approval of my father. The first thing I remember about him is that he was popular in the neighborhood and at church; everyone thought he was the most wonderful guy. It wasn't until I was a teenager that I realized that our life at home was very different from what was portrayed to the rest of the world. He was always angry about something, and we lived in fear, trying not to set him off. Even though it has been years since I lived in his house, I am constantly worried that someone around me is angry. I never feel like my own feelings matter.

ALL: The sea carries us along, sometimes rough and stormy, sometimes rocking us into a place of peace.

VOICE #2: I used to be in a relationship with a partner who did lots of little things that left me feeling like I was always a bad person. No matter what I did, this person always found fault with it, but somehow, I was the bad one. Eventually, I got out of that relationship and have since found it very hard to trust anyone. Even here. I mean, I love this place but sometimes I still struggle with trusting people in the church community. I find myself waiting for the other shoe to drop.

ALL: The journey upon the sea can be fraught with danger but we still can travel to places of connection.

VOICE #3: I find myself getting very down by what I see on the news. It seems like so many politicians are out for their own egos; I'm starting to feel cynical about everything these days. I've had a lot of dreams lately about a teacher I had in elementary school who used to put me down all the time, but then be really nice sometimes so I could never quite figure out what was going on. I guess these politicians remind me of that teacher—they say they are doing it for your own good, but after awhile, it feels like something else is going on.

ALL: The sea surprises us with the sorrow and the beauty in its depths.

VOICE #4: My family is so tired of dealing with my sister. She seems to come in and out of life like a tornado. She can seem so loving sometimes, but there's always a hidden agenda. It's taken me a long time to see that and begin to put up boundaries, but I'm so glad I have. I don't think she's ever going to change for the better.

ALL: The waves fall and break and then rise again to renew themselves.

VOICE #5: A few years ago, I got my dream job. Everything seemed ideal: great workplace, co-workers, esteemed boss. I was there only a day when I realized people were living in fear of that boss; every time this person walked into the room you could feel the tension. Nobody ever felt empowered to take ownership of their job, but we also felt like we weren't doing enough in the boss' eyes, no matter how late we stayed or how many sacrifices we made. I began to be scared to reveal anything about my personal life, no matter how small, for fear it would be used against me.

ALL: We acknowledge and hear all of these voices and recognize there are many more yet unheard. We have heard your pain. We hold you in love and healing.

Salt Communion Ritual

On the table here, we have water, essential to life. And there is a bowl of salt, symbolizing the sting of pain and hurt when our open wounds are touched with it. Yet, it too is a vital part of life. And mixed with the water, the salt becomes like the water from the sea which invites us to sail on its waves.

If you would like, in just a moment, I'm going to invite you to please come forward and add a pinch of salt to our water. The salt represents the wound you have experienced, from words or actions that were hurtful, from an experience that gave you pain, from a loss of self-esteem that you still feel keenly. I invite you to give a little bit of the sting of those wounds back to the sea. We will still carry those wounds, of course—there is no magic here. But in so doing, we remind ourselves of our place in nature itself, of the healing power offered by the possibilities of this earth.

Afterward

We have felt the sting of these wounds and we have released them into the water. We hold each other's pain and acknowledge that our work as a community involves healing both our own and others' wounds. We joyfully embrace that work.

Today we have created our own little ocean out of our tears, our pain, our connection, and our hope. Remember, nothing we do is ever done completely alone—we are always connected beyond our individual selves. This is our sometimes joyful, sometimes, poignant hallelujah.

Prayer

There is no one way to heal from the wounds we carry. At some point, we've all been wounded. Some sit here today with scars but few open wounds, and some have found this community at a time when the wounds are fresh. Know that, as hard as it sometimes is, the door needs to remain open. Know that all are welcome, whatever you carry or don't carry. Know that this is a place of love and justice. Know that we acknowledge and embrace our imperfections even as we work to transform ourselves for the better. Know that we carry on in love. Because it's worth it. Because we're needed. Because there is a great ocean of possibility—some of it horrible and awesome and terrible and some of it joyful and peaceful and wondrous—but all of it possible, all of it eternal, all of it as majestic as where the ocean's horizon meets the dawn of a new day.

Appendix C: Sample Communal Prayer Acknowledging Narcissistic Abuse Survivors

The following is an example of a prayer that could be used in a communal worship setting. The intention here is to acknowledge the experience, pain, and resilience of the survivors, as well as educating the entire congregation on the subject.

Spirit of life, love, and healing,

This morning we lift up the experiences of those who have suffered at the hands of those who were supposed to love and care for them. For those people who have experienced narcissistic people close to them who lied to them, who undermined their self-worth, who held them in cycles of acknowledgement and then ignored them, who made them question their own worth, even their own goodness—we hold them in our loving arms this morning.

We know these experiences have profoundly changed those who have survived them. And we recognize the trauma they have undergone. We wish that it had not been so, and we now offer them the love and support they need to do the work of again laying claim to their own power.

Spirit of life, God of our hearts, may these survivors know that they are loved and cared for. May they know that they are believed. May they know that we will offer support and space so they can do the healing work needed to restore their trust in others and their sense of themselves.

May they know how beautiful their souls are, how grateful we are for the compassion that lives in their hearts. May they know that this is a space that recognizes their great worth and value. May their tears be welcome here, along with their voices, their smiles, their full presence.

May they feel our love. May they feel the love of the divine. May they feel the love that exists within them, still perfect and unblemished, still theirs to own and tap into whenever they are ready.

Appendix D: Sample Pastoral Questions for Narcissistic Abuse Survivors

The following questions can be used during pastoral care sessions with survivors of narcissistic abuse. Most pastoral care sessions begin with an opportunity for the individual to check in and share what their experience has been. This list of questions can be used in any order as appropriate to what is happening within a pastoral care session. I have shared some of the methodology utilized in formulating these questions. My hope is not that this list of questions is used verbatim, but that they along with the accompanying methodology, will begin to equip clergy with approaches to pastoral care that take some of the fear (for both clergy and survivors out of dealing with this sensitive subject).

1. As I listened to you describe what you experienced, I was very aware of the painful aspects of it through the way you described it. Could you tell me a bit about how it feels to re-visit these experiences and reflect on it in this way? (This question is asked to show that the caregiver has listened to the story with empathy, which is the foundation for establishing a good relationship with the careseeker. At the same time, the question, while conveying that the listener has put themselves in the shoes of the trauma survivor to some extent, is also signaling that they are maintaining a degree of healthy separation from the careseeker by differentiating between their own feelings and thoughts and those of the careseeker. Depending on the response to this question, follow up questions might include: "How are you feeling right now as we begin this conversation?" "How did it feel to spend so much time reflecting on this incident?" "Were you surprised at anything you said or remembered?")

2. One thing I noticed in listening to you: you repeatedly connect this incident to a larger understanding of your sense of self and your identit(ies). I heard you mention that you found comfort and self-worth through exploring some particular things during this time. Can you talk more about how this exploration helped you feel better about yourself? (By paraphrasing what the survivor said, the caregiver is both showing that they have listened with empathy as well as reflecting back to the careseeker their own ideas so that they can perhaps find different further connections of understanding. Also, the questioner is helping the careseeker make connections between the traumatic experiences and the development of the self. These kinds of questions help the abuse survivor make room to better understand the ways he has bolstered his self-esteem since the incident. Further questions might include: "Of these different activities and practices, which ones do you still find meaningful?" "What do you turn to for comfort these days?" "Is there a particular activity that makes you feel closer to God or the sacred?")

3. Who, if anyone, has provided support and understanding while you went through these experiences? Today, if something bad like this happened, who would you turn to? (This question helps the caregiver to assess the careseeker's support network which will be instrumental in creating a plan for on-going healing. By affirming the people or places the careseeker finds support these days, the caregiver can help him to notice the progress made [or work still needed to be done] in building support systems since the time of the traumatic incident. Follow-up questions might include: "Who do you reach out to when you are feeling bad?" "Who do you know is there for you?" "Who have you been comfortable or would be comfortable with talking about this pattern of abuse?")

4. Understandably, much of what you shared had aspects to it that was very sorrowful: your feelings during the incident itself; your subsequent pain and shame; your wrestling with your understanding of who you are now; your confusion about how to share (or not share) this within your church community; and what role God had in this experience and your healing. Can you talk more about how you found your way through this period of sadness and confusion? (This question points to a recognition that the caregiver has understood the grief that the careseeker has wrestled with. It also encourages the careseeker to name the practical resources and spiritual practices that have helped him manage grief throughout his lifetime. Other questions might include: "What feelings do you still find yourself experiencing when thinking about this abuse?" "What brings you hope these days?" "When do you feel most spiritual?" "What is a regular practice in your life that you would define as spiritual?")

5. As I listened to your reflections, I couldn't help but think that you deserved more and better at the time. Let's take a moment to think about that. (silence) What do you think you deserved that you did not received while this was happening? (This question begins to tease out the idea of justice and healing for the person seeking care. It shows empathy with the experience and encourages the careseeker to begin thinking more deeply about his values. Follow-up questions might include: "Do you believe that there is a God or natural law that wants something for you?" That question can help the careseeker to further develop his belief system and theological framework. "How does what happened to you inform the way you approach others who might be suffering?" is a way to invite the careseeker to consider not just his own internal workings, but his values, and how his values play out in the world in relationship to other people. This outward shift can be very useful in healing, moving the focus away from just being on the

self, and instead empowering the caregiver to use their compassion [based in their own experience of suffering] to help others.)

6. I noticed how you defined your current theological understanding and how it has evolved over time, sometimes in relationship to what you have been through in this difficult experience. Can you say a little more about how you have come to your current understanding? How does it compare with your understanding of the world, God, etc. when you were growing up? (This serves as an invitation for the careseeker to more deeply examine the relationship between their childhood religious affiliation and his current one. By doing so, the caregiver can help them to make connections between the helpful pieces of his earlier theological understandings and their current one. Other questions that help examine embedded theology and religious identity include: "What do you value most these days?" "What would you say is your most deeply held belief?" "What idea sustains or nourishes you on a spiritual level?" Those questions can help the careseeker better understand where God or the sacred is to be found in his life, as well as reminding them of how they have gotten through difficult experiences. Since abuse survivors often naturally question their relationship with God or the sacred, these questions can help them to begin integrating some of these perhaps unresolved ideas with their current theological understandings.)

7. Is there anything else you haven't had a chance to share here with me today? And before we end our time together, is there anything today that has brought up particularly difficult feelings for you? (By asking these questions directly, the caregiver signals that this is a safe space to share. At this point in the conversation, some degree of trust has likely developed, and

this invitation would likely be well received. While the careseeker might not have anything to add, they would at least appreciate the invitation and the sense of safety in invokes. This safety and trust is key to a good relationship between the careseeker and caregiver.)

Appendix E: Lectio Divina Sample Worship Materials

"Say it Again: Lectio Divina"

The following grouping of liturgical materials serves as an example of a service that could be delivered to familiarize congregants both with the intent of spiritual practices and give them a sampling of one such practice (in this case, lectio divina). This format could be used for multiple worship services and could be adapted to small group ministries or other configurations that allow congregants to spend more time on the practice itself. As always, the intention here is to both offer some education on how spiritual practices offer healing as a trauma response, but also to begin the process of allowing the survivor to emotionally and spiritually engage with the material so as to model how they might incorporate this or other spiritual practices into their daily lives.

Call to Worship

This morning our service will explore the spiritual practice of lectio divina as a tool to help in response to recovery from abusive situations. This spiritual practice is an ancient one associated with Christian monastics called lectio divina. It involves connecting with text—sacred or otherwise—at our deepest level. In so doing, we open ourselves up to healing and wholeness after traumatic experiences. Whether your wounds are fresh ones or whether you simply bear faint scars, this practice can offer a way to be in greater touch with our deepest, most compassionate, and most true self. Come, let us worship together.

Chalice Lighting

Spiritual practice is not just sitting and meditation. Practice is looking, thinking, touching, drinking, eating and talking. Every act, every breath, and every step can be practice and can help us to become more ourselves. –Thich Nhat Hanh

Meditation

I invite you into the spirit of meditation and prayer. This morning we acknowledge the suffering that comes from the experience of not having our needs met by those who are supposed to be in a caring relationship with us; of being undermined in what we know to be true by family members, spouses, supervisors, and friends; of being emotionally manipulated or being in relationships that are based more on control than love. For all of these experiences and more that make up the picture of narcissistic abuse, we hold space. Let us center ourselves as we explore a spiritual practice that can aid in offering peace as we work to heal the wounds that come from this form of abuse. Let us be present to this moment, to the words that we will reflect on together. Let us allow our hearts to speak to us so that we can hear the voice of the divine speaking through the words we experience. In so doing, let us know that we are always connected to that sacred source and always capable of finding wholeness and healing.

Reading

Today's Reading is from First Corinthians, Chapter 13. You'll likely recognize it as one of the best known of the Christian scriptures, one that resonates with people of many different beliefs for both its poetic and Humanist qualities. We've chosen this passage today as an example of a text that has long been used for the purposes of lectio divina, the spiritual practice of connecting with text in a way that focuses less on content and context--and more on how the

passage resonates with you. As you listen to these words, try to notice what word or phrase jumps out at you, how you feel in response to what you hear, and what associations your mind and heart are making with the words.

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

8 Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears. 11 When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. 12 For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Sermon: “Say it Again: Lectio Divina”

This morning, we explore the nature of spiritual practices, particularly lectio divina as a tool to begin healing after trauma, particularly the trauma that comes from narcissistic abuse. I know for some of you, perhaps self-identified atheists and rationalists, the word “spiritual” might feel as vague and ubiquitous as the word “natural” stamped all over food packaging these days—food that sometimes looks—and has gone through processes—that I would describe as pretty “unnatural.”

And, most likely, I don’t have any words that can definitively turn that perspective on spirituality and spiritual practices around. We’re going to have to work with our own definitions today, and, if you choose to engage, you’ll have to actively settle upon definitions that work for you.

Skinner House—one of our Unitarian Universalist presses—published a book called “Everyday Spiritual Practices.” In it, Scott Alexander defines the difference between an activity that is more of a hobby and one that is more of a spiritual practice as differing in “intentionality, regularity, and depth.”[122] In another chapter, Susan Manker-Seale posits that spiritual practices are a response to the fact that we all “yearn for that sense of oneness with each other and all creation, to know our place and our value.”[123] Our Unitarian Universalist website says of spiritual practices that these are “diverse and meaningful ways to connect with the sacred.”[124] Sacred, of course, is another word some might feel allergic to, but it conveniently has two

[122] Alexander, *Everyday Spiritual Practice,* 5.
[123] Alexander, *Everyday Spiritual Practice,* 11.
[124] “Spiritual Practice and Prayer in Unitarian Universalism,” Unitarian Universalist Association, November 28, 2021, https://web.archive.org/web/20210226223200/https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-do/spirituality.

definitions—one, veneration that comes from its connection to God—hello, God believers!, and two, something that simply evokes great respect—hello, atheists!

So, with all that said, I'm not sure we're any closer to pinpointing exactly what spirituality is or what spiritual practices are—but that's the point of words like these, ones inherently loaded with invitations for metaphor and an individual's interpretative lens. We can simply resist leaning into them because of our own own feelings, history, and baggage around traditional religious language and practices, or we can decide that these words and their associated practices have forever been evolving over the years and find our place within them. The choice, of course, is always the individual's.

So why spiritual practices—why now? Well, I'll be frank with you: because the mental health of this country is in pretty bad shape right now. This is observational—not scientific—but I'd venture to say that any society that doesn't just flirt with authoritarianism but gets to first or second base with it, is a society that isn't thinking properly. We've seen in our leadership the unfortunate traits of narcissism run amok, and for many of us, that has been triggering in recognition of our own experiences with people in our lives who were supposed to have our best interests at heart, but unfortunately, suffered from this personality disorder. We as a nation are a traumatized people, survivors of narcissistic abuse, whether we are aware of it or not. And this shared trauma has many of us asking what role the church can have in offering healing. How do we center healing from narcissistic abuse and trauma right here in our church community?

So the short answer is that we are going to have to draw upon every resource that it's got. In our tradition, we have things like skepticism, rationalism, and justice making. We've been employing all of those over the past several years, but as particularly marginalized groups in our midst, such as the BIPOC community have been telling us over the past few years, we're going

to have to draw upon more resources at our disposal, even ones that maybe make some of us uncomfortable, like exploring spiritual practices. Because we are going to have to do everything we can do to foster healing for this damaged society—and for ourselves.

At this moment in time, I recognize the trauma we have all experienced and that we continue to be haunted by so much of what we have experienced. If you have been in a damaging relationship with a narcissist, I see you this morning. If you have simply experienced the events of recent months and years and felt the confusion and trauma that comes from that witness, I see you.

And that's where spiritual practices come into the picture. Because they are another tool to use to bring our inner selves to places of peace, to offer some healing for the trauma that has been experienced. Many of these ancient practices we'll explore have scientific standing today, mostly because they encourage the kind of mindfulness practices that we now know have beneficial effects on our physical and mental well-being.

So the practice of Lectio Divina associated with Christian monastics may seem very far away from Unitarian Universalism—but guess what? The roots of this practice are traced directly back to the early prominent theologian Origen, who lived in Alexandria in the Third Century. Origen is often understood to be the first well-known Unitarian and Universalist—and it is from Origen originating the practice of scriptural reflection and interpretation that Lectio Divina was created. So we inherit this particular spiritual practice honestly, which perhaps explains why so many UU churches across the country make a monthly practice of it and it's even included in our children's curriculum.

As our Worship Associated modeled for you this morning in reading the well known "Love is patient; love is kind" passage, there are four basic steps to lectio divina: lectio, where

one slowly reads and re-reads the text, paying attention to the meaning. Once the meaning has been understood from this thoughtful process, the meditatio step invites you to read and re-read a word or phrase that you find yourself attracted to. What meaning do these words have in the context of your life? How do they connect with you emotionally in relationship to the abuse you suffered?

Oratio is where you open your heart to whatever you open your heart to: Nature, the Spirit of Life, God, whatever you feel connected to beyond you. To be personal, for me, it's primarily grasping a sense that I'm part of a great planet, a vast universe—something bigger than my own ego. I don't need to feel like it's supernatural or that anything is happening beyond my own thought and imagination for it to be meaningful. And then, when we have found that sense of openness, we meditate on the questions of what the meaning of this text invites us to do in our lives, perhaps in response to what we need to do to heal from the abuse we have experienced? Or how have we been changed by what we have read, even in some small way? How has it illuminated something for us or offered us hope even as we still acknowledge the trauma that informs our lives?

Finally, contemplatio asks us to sit in the silence of the moment. We might or might not be like Christian monastics ¬¬who felt the presence of God in this moment; we might simply feel a sense of peace and gratitude for having moved through this process of reflection, for how we have been moved or changed or even comforted by the experience. Virtually any text can be used in this process: a traditional sacred text like a biblica passage, or a poem—something from Maya Angelou or Robert Frost or Emily Dickinson or Langston Hughes. Or you could even turn toward a novel.

You know, on the third Saturday of the month, I run a Zoom group here at UUCF dedicated to dealing with stress, anxiety, and depression. We usually have six to ten participants, though we would welcome more. It's not a group for people necessarily dealing with clinical levels of these issues—it's primarily set up as a group that acknowledges the everyday stresses and anxieties of life and offers people the opportunity to share with one another the ways in which they've been managing them.

One of the things we've talked about is how during the pandemic, so many of us have returned to reading books we've read before. There's a comfort, certainly, in returning to an old favorite—dusting off a copy of *The Color Purple* or *Pride and Prejudice* or *Great Expectations* or *The Lord of the Rings* or whatever your book of choice may be. And in this group, we have affirmed for one another the value of picking up an old favorite—that we don't always have to be reading or learning something new.

But perhaps that return to our favorite books during hard times is more than just comfort because they are familiar; perhaps there is something—to use that dreaded word—"spiritual" in this process. Certainly, the first time I read a book, I am mostly concerned about its content: what is the story its telling? What is the context? What is it about?

But to return to an old favorite is to go deeper into its meaning—reflective in an informal way of this process of lectio divina. To read *The Color Purple* now is not to be concerned with the mechanics of the plot or form, but with the depth of the determination and resiliency of the characters; with the economy of words that begin to dissolve into poetry in the way they evoke such vivid imagery. To read *1984* again is to re-enter a bleak world one is already familiar with, but this time its vivid horrors are experienced on another level: we search for the humanity in between the words; we lament the loss of what we believe is sacred and we feel its warning for

our own lives—and a strange certain oneness with humanity as we realize that what we witness in the world, no matter how terrible, has been imagined before. *Pride and Prejudice* in its perfect plotting dazzles us more the second or third time with its joyous embrace of human relationships, even amidst the mechanics of matrimonial financial contingency planning, the sparkle and shine of humanity's foibles and gifts shine through.

And when we sit a little longer with a beloved favorite, we might feel that connection to something greater. Perhaps we feel connected to the world of the story, even one populated by talking lions or determined hobbits. Perhaps we feel connected to the author: for a moment, we are a Bronte sister, living on the moors, or James Baldwin settling in the south of France. And perhaps, along with this sense of direct connection to the book, we also gain a larger sense of connection: to the rest of humanity, both in its good and bad qualities; to the planet, to the universe, to God, to our own creative spirit, to our intellects and emotions which have been stimulated and which too can be as expansive as all creation.

For people who have experienced trauma, for those recovering from abuse, returning to an old favorite, whether the familiarity of the Bible or a favorite novel, allows them to feel the comfort that comes from something that is already known and friendly. But lectio divina also allows the possibility of further wisdom and healing to come through, thus creating a very safe but potentially spiritually rich experience for a survivor.

Ultimately then, what we are talking about here—and this is really true of all spiritual practices—is that we have to stop for a moment. And the best way to stop is to make it a practice—like Scott Alexander said, a practice that is intentional, regular, and has some depth to it. I think the world we live in is a lot like a carousel that never stops: there are lots of flashing lights, and maybe the scenery seems to change, but that's only because the carousel is moving so

fast to begin with. There's lots of noise, but the reality is that the cycle of news, the consumer driven pipeline of books, movies, and tv shows, even the conversations we might have—all can actually be us circling the same center point without fully realizing it. In order to begin the process of healing, it's important to step off the carousel every now and then—and to find a quiet spot, maybe to settle down with a favorite passage from a book and practice a loose form of something like lectio divina, or maybe just to take a moment of mindfulness to actually be present to what's actually living in our hearts and minds at the moment.

For whatever's there is worth knowing.

And whatever's there might be a source of healing or hope.

It might point the way to something else, or it might just hold us in this moment.

But whatever it is, it will remain unknown unless space is made for it to reveal itself.

Appendix F: Art as Spiritual Practice Sample Liturgical Materials

The following is a sampling of materials that can be used in a worship service designed to promote the exploration of art as a healing spiritual practice. This service is entitled "The Healing Power of Art." During the service, congregants are invited to contribute brushstrokes to a large canvas at the front of the sanctuary. Musical interludes can also be utilized during which images of art can be projected on screens.

Call to Worship

We begin today with a blank canvas, a blank page, something to fill—together. I invite our children to begin this process of filling this canvas, as we explore the intersection of art and faith this morning. By the end of this service, our congregation will have created a painting together. In her book *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith & Art*, Madeleine L'Engle says "I am glad to be here, in this alarming and disastrous and marvelous world. Western civilization may be on the decline, but a civilization that has produced Bach and Rembrandt and Dostoyevsky (to limit myself to three favorites) cannot be tossed aside as worthless. Bach who, in terms of the evolutionary process, is as close to us in time as last night, Bach will always pull me back and give me the courage to accept what our free will is meant to do to help God write the story."[125] Art can pull us back—back from places of brokenness that come from despair, from the reckoning of abuse. Together, this morning we will invite in the sacred through art—and in so doing, we begin to offer wholeness and healing to ourselves.

Let us worship together.

[125] L'Engle, *Walking on Water*, 105.

Chalice Lighting

In art, we are reminded again of who we are and what we are capable of. In art, we re-discover and newly discover our deepest selves. In art, we learn to cultivate possibility amidst hopelessness—and in so doing, we create spaces of transformation for ourselves and the world. Together, we kindle the flame of art, lighting the fire of creativity and possibility.

Reflection #1

Pictures created from the eyes of painters and photographers can inspire us, move us, and even remind us of the love in our lives. In 1868, Modest Mussorgsky first met the artist, architect, and designer Viktor Hartmann. Both men were devoted to the cause of an intrinsically Russian art and quickly became friends, supporting each other's artistic ambitions and sharing a bond of love and affection. Hartmann's sudden death on August 4, 1873 at age thirty-nine plunged the composer into deep despair. The next year, a memorial of over four hundred Hartmann works was exhibited in the Imperial Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg. Mussorgsky lent to the exhibition two pictures Hartmann had given him, and viewed the show in person. Deeply moved by seeing his friend's art on display, Mussorgsky was then compelled to compose Pictures at an Exhibition. He was so inspired that he completed the score in a mere twenty days, seeing it as a tribute to his beloved friend. Hear now Mussorgsky's "The Great Gate of Kiev," a musical response to the picture Hartmann had painted—and of the love he had for his friend.

Reflection #2

Leonard Bernstein said that for him, his music, his art was "cosmos in chaos." We are going to invite in a little further chaos today, in order that we might find the cosmos within it. As

the service proceeds, you are invited to come forward and take your turn at the canvas here at the front—during any of the readings, music, or other parts of the service ahead, letting the feel of the moment inform your artistic choices. There is no order to this, no plan for who goes first and who comes next; this is a chance for anyone who has ever been afraid to create art to take the plunge. You are invited to come forward as you feel moved to do so and add a brush stroke or two to the canvas. As in life, if your brush stroke is bold and colorful, your mark will help to fill up the space, to make a statement. We want to give everyone who wants a turn a chance, so we ask that your time at the canvas be conscious of others who want to be there. But don't be afraid to make your mark on it. At the end of the service, during our Closing Hymn, I will be putting the final touches on it and then we will all look at what we have created in this time together. So don't be shy! A person or two can come forward now to begin painting and as you see someone finishing, feel free to come add your brush stroke to the canvas. We have lots more time, so there is no hurry—we don't want more than a couple of people gathered around the painting at any point in time.

Reflection #3

Julia Cameron from *The Artist's Way*

"Creativity is a natural life force that all can experience in one form or another. Just as blood is part of our physical body and is nothing we must invent, creativity is part of us and we each can tap into the greater creative energies of the universe and pull from that vast, powerful spiritual wellspring to amplify our own individual creativity.

"As a culture, we tend to define creativity too narrowly and to think of it in elitist terms, as something belonging to a small chosen tribe of 'real artists.' But in reality, everything we do requires making creative choices, although we seldom recognize that fact.

"Creativity is a spiritual force. The force that drives the green fuse through the flower, as Dylan Thomas defined his idea of the life force, is the same urge that drives us toward creation. There is a central will to create that is part of our human heritage and potential. Because creation is always an act of faith, and faith is a spiritual issue, so is creativity. As we strive for our highest selves, our spiritual selves, we cannot help but be more aware, more proactive, and more creative."[126]

Our lives are ours to sculpt, to paint, to shape, to draw, to act out, to compose, to sing. It is in the living of our lives that we have the opportunity to be artists; to tap into our creative selves, whether our creative muse be poetics or mathematics. It is in the realization of our potential as human beings that we find hope, even salvation, especially as we recover from abusive situations. It is in art that we find ourselves.

Please join me in a moment of silence.

Spirit of life, we hold this moment together, this reverie—a moment of dreams and possibility. What is produced by the fruits of our humanity in this reverie is our art. We meet the challenges of our own lives—our places of sorrow and loss, sadness and anger, brokenness and despair, with the knowledge that we are also creators, creators of change, of transformation. We meet the challenges of a troubled world—places of greed, violence, authoritarianism, hatred, narcissism—and know that when we tap into creativity, possibility, we discover solutions that offer transformation and healing. Let us see this reverie as sacred—this time we share on

[126] Cameron, *The Artist's Way*, 469-470.

Sundays—in music, let us feel poetry, let us see paintings, feel sculpture, know art. This is our reverie.

Conclusion

When I first got to Los Angeles at the age of eighteen, I met up with the great Stella Adler. At one time, there were two major schools of acting: the Lee Strasberg method and the Stella Adler method. By the time I briefly knew Stella, she was at the end of her life, but still offering theatre classes from the chaise lounge in her Louis Quinze decorated apartment. For a week, a young actress and I privately rehearsed a scene, and then nervously but proudly presented it to Stella, who sat inscrutably atop that ornate lounge. I thought we performed our scene well—we had made it real, subtle, a casual conversation that you might overhear at a bus stop.

We waited for Stella's verdict. She took a long pause—and remember, she was from the early days of Hollywood so with a Transatlantic accent in place and a tendency to call everyone in her vicinity "darling," she said, "But you have to lift it, darling."

I must have said something like, "Huh?"

She waved one bejeweled hand. "Lift it!" she said impatiently. "Art is about lifting it."

I wanted to ask what she meant but she was tired then and we were quickly ushered out. That was the last time I ever saw her.

I've thought about "lift it, darling" over the years and eventually came to know what she meant. We had tried to create art by mimicking everyday reality, but art really is about having something to say—lifting the art medium, whatever it is, above the everyday, so it is infused with meaning.

It's what I think we do in church community when we come together each week. The truth is that we sit here in a room every Sunday morning and speak and sing. When I say it like that, we wonder what its value is. It's in the lifting of our time together that it finds its value. We aren't just singing hymns—we are singing as a community, stating our values in song. We aren't just speaking words—we are inviting hope and possibility in. And this lifting is what I think we are called to do now when we encounter brokenness in ourselves and one another. Too often in our culture, people turn away from the abuse people experience in their daily lives, and so it's time for a cultural revolution.

Unitarian Universalists have a history of seeing the relationship between art and cultural revolution, particularly in the Transcendentalist movement. In that time period of the early 1800s, there were grave injustices in the social system, mainstream culture was hollow, journalism lacked integrity, there were legitimate concerns about the state of Intellectualism, and there was a brash, controversial president. Sounds a lot like contemporary times, doesn't it? And the Unitarians created Transcendentalism as the movement to respond to those conditions—a movement that was all about "lifting it," a movement that welcomed in the fundamentals of art and inspiration in order to problem solve. What is our movement today going to look like? It can't just be facebook discussions or protests on the courthouse steps. A cultural revolution requires engagement on multiple levels; it requires us to dance with uncertainty and the messiness of creation, just as we are doing here in this service today. It requires us to make space for healing our own woundedness so that we can help others to heal.

We are all living in places of uncertainty; we have all seen how narcissistic and abusive tactics denigrate the soul of a country. We don't know what the future holds or what our children or grandchildren or great-grandchildren will face. We can struggle with whether it's worth going

on or not. We try to make change in the places we can—we try to "lift it" wherever we can—but we wonder whether it really makes a difference in the grand scheme of things.

And that's what all this is about today: some of you may be called to traditional art forms and some not, but the point is that we can all learn from the drive to follow our instincts, to nurture our creativity, because in that willingness to see our own lives as art and ourselves as the artists, we gain back the power to shape our lives in ways that are meaningful. We have the choice—even in the midst of the current political climate, even amidst the division in our country, even within the limitations of our bodies whether young or old, male or female—we have the choice to "lift it," to get in touch with something more, to begin a revolution of not only the world around us, but our very selves, in the way we open ourselves up to possibility.

Appendix G: Physical Spiritual Practice Sample Intention Statement

The following is an intention statement I wrote as I committed to a physical practice of a walking meditation. Obviously, to be useful to the practitioner, a statement needs to be crafted to be reflective of their intentions. It can be useful for the practitioner to begin making connections between their trauma and the choice of practice, but it is not necessary if they cannot articulate it at the time of writing. The most important thing is that within the statement they make an attainable commitment to a physical spiritual practice.

Having taken a class through Claremont Lincoln where I committed to a traditional meditation practice of stillness (eyes closed, slow breathing, etc.), I discovered that while this practice was useful to me, it ended up not being particularly complementary to my daily life. Finding that quiet space for meditation actually produced quite a bit of anxiety as it just didn't fit into the rhythm of my life as well as I had hoped. This time, I have chosen a spiritual practice that I will actually look forward to.

With that in mind, I have again chosen a form of meditation, but feel drawn this time to a walking meditation practice. My commitment to this practice includes it being a time of solitude, a time of silence, a time of rhythmic movement, and a time to mindfully appreciate whatever beauty I encounter around me. I am hoping that it will be a time to allow my head and heart to clear so that I feel more spiritually connected. I plan to engage in this practice for at least twenty minutes a day, five days a week.

For me, my primary response to trauma has been to develop a pattern of shying away from my own feelings and, instead, focus on the feelings of others, sometimes to the detriment of being able to recognize and name my own feelings. So this walking meditation can serve as a form of compassion to myself: time dedicated to my own spiritual and physical well-being, and

time to get in touch with my center. The nature of my traumatic experiences has left me with needing to practice forms of self-care that help me get in touch with my own needs and feelings, which have been something I have been disconnected from during earlier periods in my life. By making time for this spiritual practice, I hope to continue to deepen this work of getting in touch with my authentic self.

As a minister, I recognize the necessity of this continued work on myself in order to avoid ministerial burn-out or struggling to be present for others when I am needed. When I do the work of being in touch with my own feelings, whatever they may be, then I can much more readily be present for others and find it a sustaining, and not draining, experience.

Appendix H: Compassion Practice Sample Liturgical Materials

The following is an example of materials that could be used in a worship service to begin educating a congregation about the Compassion Practice. These materials can also serve as a general model for how to share similar gratitude, empathy, or compassion practices with a congregation. Part education/part modeling/part invitation, a worship service designed effectively around these practices can invite the survivor to consider utilizing the practice as a tool for their own personal healing.

Call to Worship

Today we explore the practice of compassion through the work of Dr. Frank Rogers Jr., founder of the Center for Engaged Compassion and graduate of Princeton. These words come from Dr. Rogers book *Practicing Compassion*.

"Compassion is the heartbeat of humanity.
We are most fully human,
Most fully ourselves,
When we see someone in the truth of his or her experience
And are moved to respond with kindness and care.

"We glimpse a colleague smiling at his beloved's photograph,
And our smile in response offers respite for us both
From the whirlwind of the workday.
We see our teenage daughter asleep on the couch,

The cat curled up in her lap,

And the wash of affection that comes over us

Reminds us of the love that ties us together.

"We see the same teenager, now late for school,

Frowning at her reflection in the mirror,

And the morning's mad dash dissolves

Into the yearning that our child know the beauty we behold.

"Pausing from the busyness of our lives

And recognizing the tender humanity of another

Restores us to our own humanity.

The pulse of care and connection within us resuscitates.

"Our hearts,

Normally dulled by the day's burdens,

Beat freely with love.

And the ensuing kindness we extend to others

Has the power to resuscitate their spirits as well.

"For compassion not only restores the heart of our own humanity;

Its healing care makes human once more

The heart of another grown hard and cold."[127]

This morning, with open hearts and open minds, together we embrace a hope for humanity through analyzing the practice of true compassion. Let us worship together.

Sermon

Ever feel like you're in a rut?

Like the bad things you've experienced are running in a loop in your head?

Or maybe you are just struggling to get out of your own thoughts; life can feel overwhelming, and it can be hard to see beyond the ends of our own noses.

I want to share with you a practice that helps us get un-set in our ways. A practice that helps bring us back to compassion when compassion is hard to find. Sometimes that's just because life has made us so busy we have lost sight of our compassion; sometimes it's because we've experienced abuse in some form that has distanced us from our most compassionate self.

But first of all, what are we talking about when we talk about being compassionate?

One of the first things that comes to mind is that compassion are often mistakenly conflated. Empathy is when we put ourselves in another's shoes and allow ourselves to feel what they must be feeling. And we know that can be hard. It's tough to put ourselves in the shoes of someone going through chemotherapy, someone recovering from domestic violence, someone dealing with the death of a loved one. We can sit with that person and feel, to some degree, what they are feeling, and then come home and feel wiped out.

I hear people talk about the burnout that can come from empathy. "How do you do that?" they will even say to me, when I talk about facilitating our own grief group here at UUCF or

[127] Rogers, *Practicing Compassion*, 9.

meeting with a congregant going through a life crisis. I hear people talk about people who work in hospices, or nurses in trauma units, or therapists and counselors. “How can they do that?” The idea is that being with people in crisis and practicing empathy is exhausting. And the truth is, they are right. Empathy is exhausting; the results show up as such on brain scans. Empathy and empathy alone is not enough to sustain us.

So how does compassion differ? Compassion can be regarded as an authentic feeling of love that flows freely from one heart to another. What this means is that to achieve compassion we don’t just empathize with someone else’s feelings—their anger, frustration, sadness, despair, pain—we then position ourselves with a loving regard for them. And, unlike empathy, in scientific studies, this practice of compassion ignites different areas in our brain: not the areas that exhaust us, but rather, the ones that restore and nurture us. Compassion leads us back to our own humanity. It doesn’t drain like unfettered empathy does; it gives back.

I’m convinced that the people who are truly successful in the helping professions, whether they be teachers, doctors, nurses, social activists, etc.—all at least instinctively have stumbled upon the practice of not just being empathetic but taking that next step of lovingly regarding those they are empathizing with. This active engagement with love is what continues to feed them. Frank Rogers says our compassionate, connected self is our truest self, our essence, our core. Cultivating compassion is about remembering who we really are; removing the obstacles in the way to uncover our truest essence.

But this is easier said than done when we are triggered by difficult situations and people. We can find ourselves in a place that is the opposite of our connected self—it’s our alienated self. When we are in this place, we are enslaved by what Rogers calls our interior movements: overwhelming emotions, internal monologues that tell us we’re not good enough, habitual

behaviors that aren't good for us, negative narratives real and imagined that replay through our heads, and all the bodily sensations that go with this—tension headaches, upset stomachs, stiff necks, etc. When we are in this state we often respond in one of two ways: we either act out, which means me submit to these feelings, or we resist, where we try to ignore this interior movement.

Both acting our and resistance are counter-productive. Neither one addresses that these activated interior movements are rooted in internal suffering, what Rogers sees as distorted cries frantically waving to get our attention: fears we're still holding onto, deep longings that have remain unfulfilled, aching wounds still unhealed, and gifts that have been stifled. These interior movements are not "bad" things; they are actually flags intended to secure our survival, healing, or flourishing. We just have to know how to respond to them.

And that's one of the reason Frank Rogers set out to create a practice that helped us reconnect with compassion for ourselves and others, especially when it's hard. Rogers capsulizes the process of restoring compassion utilizing the acronym P.U.L.S.E—pulse.

So what does PULSE mean?

P stands for: Paying attention to the movement without acting out its power nor judging its presence within you. If you think about something that triggers you—maybe it's someone in your life, maybe it's a particular issue in the news that gets your heart pounding in your ears, maybe it's a situation in your job or your family life that always ends in raised voices—it's hard to pay attention to your interior movement in those moments. When we are being reactive or resisting, we aren't able to simply pay attention and ask ourselves: what am I feeling? What am I noticing in this moment? By paying attention, we free ourselves from the enslavement of these interior movements.

The U in Pulse refers to Understanding the suffering at the root of that movement's cry. What's really going on in this moment? What am I really feeling? What other situations in my life does this feel like?

I'll give you one instance from my own life that happened just this week. I woke up pretty early on Monday, about 6 AM and decided to check my email. I found I had received an email from the dean at my seminary that was entitled "Concerned About Your Coursework." The lengthy email was clearly written with a great deal of concern. It was informing me that I currently had a C in one of my classes and a C was considered failing at the doctoral level. Well, I knew immediately that this was a mistake. I had received full credit for everything I had done in that class, including a hundred percent on the only paper we had turned in thus far.

But even though I knew that some mistake had been made, I found myself quite reactive. "How dare they send me this email?" "What will people think of me?" "Don't they know what a good student I am?" And so on. I was equal parts reactive and resisting, as the other part of me kept telling myself, "Don't be an idiot; you know this is a simple mistake, easily correctable; why are you making such a big deal of this?"

I finally settled down into moving through the compassion practice. The first thing to do was to take a breath and catalogue all I was feeling, and, in so doing, I was able to step away from being enslaved by those interior movements and actually feel a certain objectivity to them.

The second step is about understanding the suffering at the root. So I asked myself: what is this about? And it was an easy connection to make. I'm a good student; I always have been. And it's not hard to see why. As a young boy, I was more inclined to read a book than play sports, unlike the other boys, and being good in school helped me to feel like I had value. It made

me feel worthy of being alive. So an email like this threatened my very sense of value, my sense of being worth a place on this earth.

That's heavy stuff at 6:00 in the morning!

So what happens next in the PULSE practice? L is about Loving with empathic connection the suffering one senses. This is perhaps the place most of us don't intuitively get to. I had to not just understand what my response to that email was, but to actually reach out with love to the boy who thought his self-worth was tied up with how good a student he was.

S of PULSE is where I may lose some of you, but I hope not. Rogers describes it as, "Sensing the Sacred's compassion for whatever that suffering is." Now, since a certain number in this room don't believe in a conception of God—even as a certain number do—what are we talking about when we talk about the Sacred here? A way of understanding that is by thinking about what is universal about the experience and then bestowing compassion upon it in recognition it is part of the larger human experience. So when I pull back from myself, I can recognize that, of course, I was only one of many children who felt like, for whatever reason, they didn't belong. I was only one of many children who found something that adults approved of and made that a way of valuing myself. Whether it's a little girl who thought she had to be pretty to be of value, or whatever it was, I am not alone, and I can feel that there is a universal sense of compassion available to us all. Call it the Sacred, or God, or the Divine, or simply common sense in understanding that this is part of the human experience—whatever we call it, I can feel this sense of care when I pull back from my individual self to something that has larger scope.

And, finally, the E of PULSE: Embodying the new life aching to be birthed. What have I learned from this? Who am I now that I have extended this compassion to myself and allowed in a sense of the greater compassion available to all of us? Rogers says this step allows us to now

"extend compassion toward others." In the example I shared, by the time my professor has sent an email explaining she had lost my paper in her emails, I was able to send back a response: "Don't worry; it could happen to anyone. It's no big deal." And, by that point, I meant it. What would have been annoyance before had changed to compassion.

The example I gave was from a mildly difficult situation—but what if there had been a difficult person involved? The process is the same initially—we go through the PULSE process, finding compassion for ourselves first. And then, when we reach that place of compassion, we go through the PULSE process again, but this time focused on the other person. We nonjudgmentally pay attention to their behaviors, emotions, words, body language. We then seek to understand them: what seems to be their deepest fear? Deepest longing? Aching wound? Stifled gift trying to make itself known? We can't have definitive answers for these things; like detectives, we have to work from our intellects and intuition—even our imaginations—but that's okay because we are not trying to diagnose them—we are simply trying to find some way of conceptualizing our own sense of their humanity. We then invite in our love for what understanding has been revealed about this person, we work to sense what is sacred or universal about this, and then finally we embody all of this in ourselves as we consider how to move forward with that person.

So why does this matter to we liberally religious folks who call ourselves Unitarian Universalists? Part of our call, one that stems both from the Protestant roots and secular humanist roots of our tradition, is to help humanity be the best it can be. In the times we live in, it can be challenging to maintain our compassion, both for others and ourselves. Compassion brings us closer to who we truly are at our core—our best selves—our connected selves—and this world desperately needs that right now. We will not heal from abusive situations or our recent shared

past by simply voting in new leadership or building new systems—all of which are important. We must begin to intentionally work to be the compassionate species humanity can be; and when we can do so, we teach our children to be the same, and they, in turn, will teach their children, and perhaps, someday, long after we're gone but our legacy remains nonetheless, this world will begin to look more like the beloved community we know it can be.

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